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Gender non-conformity and the modern workplace:
New frontiers in understanding and promoting gender identity expression at work

Katina Sawyer, Christian Thoroughgood

"There is nothing more beautiful than seeing a person being themselves."

—Steve Maraboli, Ph.D.

As the opening quote suggests, when employees can authentically express themselves at work, they tend to be happier and healthier. In today's modern workplace, HR managers are having to increasingly address the many complex issues surrounding *gender* identity and expression. With the public gender transitions of celebrities like Caitlin Jenner (reality television star and former Olympian), the greater media visibility of transgender individuals such as LaVerne Cox (actress, best known for her role in the television series, *Orange is the New Black*), and the increased support for television programming that features transgender characters (e.g., Amazon's *Transparent)*, transgender issues have become a focal point of discussion in the national discourse.

As the public becomes more aware of and sensitive to the many struggles that transgender individuals often face in society, employers must strategically adapt to this growing focus on promoting transgender equality. Moreover, given the rise in transgender individuals "coming out" in the public sphere, transgender employees may be more likely to disclose their gender identities at work. Thus, organizations must be prepared to address the needs of their transgender workforce by becoming educated on matters of gender expression at work (e.g., gender transitions, bathroom usage, proper use of pronouns) and by creating initiatives that promote transgender awareness and inclusivity. Additionally, because experiences of workplace discrimination have been demonstrated to decrease job satisfaction, employee engagement, and productivity, they have consequences for the bottom line. Further, legal costs associated with discrimination cases can be financially costly to organizations. As such, supporting transgender employees is not only a moral imperative for organizations, but it may also yield positive economic effects.

In this article, we outline what organizations need to know about transgender inclusivity from a legal perspective, both at the federal and state level, while also discussing the ways in which organizations can create their own best practices for promoting workplace equality for transgender employees. We also highlight some of the key challenges that transgender employees often face in their daily work lives, including stigma and negative interpersonal interactions, and offer some guidance regarding interventions that might reverse the damaging effects of these experiences. Importantly, we stress that, while employers should pay attention to federal and state law regarding gender expression in the workplace, they should not wait for these laws to be passed in order to begin supporting their transgender employees. Rather, organizations would be better served by being proactive in this regard, despite whether the law requires them to do so or not. In so doing, organizations can drive legislation that fosters transgender inclusivity, instead of merely reacting to it. We outline below the ways in which employers might go above and beyond current legal requirements to foster transgender equality.

DEFINING KEY TERMS

Before proceeding, we define several important terms. The term "gender expression" encompasses any of the ways in

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which employees, whether transgender or not, express themselves with regard to gendered behaviors or clothing. For example, a female employee who does not wear dresses or skirts expresses gender differently than what may be expected of her at work, even if she does not consider herself to be transgender. Thus, she might be viewed as being slightly unconventional with regard to her gender expression. Individuals who do not conform to gender expectations (i.e., stereotypical expectations for male and female gender displays regarding clothing, manner of speaking, etc.) therefore may deem themselves "gender non-conforming". Transgender individuals express their gender in alignment with expectations for those of the opposite sex from which they were born. For example, a transgender individual who was born with male genitalia, but who identifies as female, would tend to express their gender consistent with expectations of female gender expression (i.e., wearing dresses and makeup). As such, transgender individuals are usually perceived as being counter-normative in terms of gender given that they express gender differently than the majority of the larger population. Additionally, those who are "genderqueer" express their gender identity in a more fluid manner—not as "male" or "female" but rather as a free-flowing state of personal expression that may contain components from both or neither of these categories.

Because gender norms are so ingrained in society, individuals who break from them are often stigmatized. Within the psychology literature, stigma theory provides a framework for understanding the experiences of those who have been negatively stereotyped in society. Based on Goffman's (1963) seminal work, "*Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*", stigma theory posits that stigmas reflect socially undesirable, or deviant, characteristics that discredit and devalue a person's social identity within a specific social context. These stigmatizing "marks" devalue stigmatized individuals in the eyes of others by reducing them from a whole person to a "tainted" one. In turn, such marks become associated with negative stereotypes and assessments, which tend to be widely adopted and pervasive within social systems and which provide basis for marginalizing those who possess the stigma. Stigma theory further posits that stigmas vary along a series of dimensions, such as their concealability (i.e., the extent to which the stigma can be hidden or not), perceived controllability (i.e., the extent to which the stigma is generally perceived to be a personal choice), and disruptiveness (i.e., the extent to which the stigma interferes with social interactions). For transgender individuals, these characteristics of their stigma may together contribute to the strong social backlash they may often experience in social settings, as well as the negative psychological consequences of these experiences.

Importantly, societal gender norms, the source of stigma for transgender individuals, do not have much to do with our biology. For example, different societies display gender in different ways, and our expressions of gender have changed over time despite our biological characteristics remaining constant. This evidence suggests norms for gender expression are socially constructed in societies. Yet, as described above, those who choose to defy these socially constructed norms are often stigmatized, despite the fact that such norms are culturally defined and "unnatural" in the sense that they do not represent biological imperatives. Thus, we will be using terms such as gender non-conforming, transgender, and genderqueer to refer to the spectrum of people who do not align with societal expectations for gender expression. While there are many other labels that individuals may use to describe their gender identity, it is beyond the scope of this article to define all of these categories. It is worth noting that sexual orientation and gender identity are separate identity categories. Sexual orientation denotes a preference for the sex or gender of a romantic partner, while gender expression denotes a personal preference for displaying gender via clothing and behaviors (i.e., wearing skirts vs. pants, having a higher pitched voice versus a lower pitched voice). While sexual orientation and gender expression are often conflated, they are actually separate continua. This article therefore does not address the various challenges often faced by lesbian, gay, or bisexual employees in the workplace.

LEGAL ISSUES SURROUNDING GENDER EXPRESSION AT WORK

While transgender employees often face consistent stigma at work and in society, legally there are some protections that exist for this population compared to sexual orientation minorities. For example, given discrimination based on gender expression is deemed a form of gender discrimination, individuals who have negative work experiences due to their gender identity are covered under guidelines outlined by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) in the U. S. Indeed, in Hopkins v. Pricewaterhouse, it was ruled that a senior woman who was not granted a promotion, partially because of perceptions of her attire being "too masculine", was entitled to a settlement based on gender discrimination. While not intended to cover transgender individuals, this case set a precedent that has transcended minor deviations from expected gender expression and now protects employees who display gender in ways that align with expectations of the "opposite" sex. Thus, employees' gender expression choices do not have to align with normative gendered expectations that are associated with their biological sex.

Yet, it is important to note that, globally, federal law regarding gender expression varies widely. Many countries have specific transgender anti-discrimination protections that exist at the federal level, such as the United Kingdom, Spain, and Australia. However, in countries like the United States, in which no specific protections for transgender employees exist, transgender employees continue to suffer high rates of violence and discrimination given it is often difficult to prove that discrimination resulted specifically from gendered expectations related to one's biological sex. Even more alarming, in some countries, such as Iran, Nigeria, and Pakistan, individuals can be sentenced to death for being transgender. Thus, when operating in a global environment, it is important to be mindful of how protections may vary and what this might mean for transgender employees in the workplace.

In the U.S., state laws have recently been passed which aim to actively strip transgender employees of equal protections, using religious freedoms acts as a rationale for revoking or prohibiting equal protections under the law. For example, North Carolina recently passed legislation that

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prohibits transgender people from using public restrooms that align with their gender identity and which prohibits cities from providing LGBT-specific protections from discrimination. Laws such as this prevent cities from creating spaces in which transgender individuals have legal recourse when they face societal or workplace discrimination, increasing the likelihood that individuals who express gender differently will be treated unfairly in society and in the workplace. Although there has been substantial backlash toward this law, it demonstrates the continued presence of negative sentiments toward transgender individuals at a societal level and may also be indicative of a lack of education and awareness with regard to transgender individuals' daily lived experiences.

In many ways, the law passed in North Carolina demonstrates that transgender inclusivity remains in flux and highlights the possibility for legislative bodies to become decreasingly progressive over time. As such, it is important that organizations recognize the power that they hold to promote more inclusive workplaces for their employees. Although pushing for explicit legal protections at the federal or state level is important, employers may have little control over the political nature of these decisions and it may take some time before these laws are passed. For this reason, we stress the need for organizations to take proactive steps toward creating a safe and inclusive work environment for transgender employees, rather than simply taking a reactive stance that focuses on maintaining legal compliance. Not only do such efforts serve to counteract discrimination, but they also signal to an organization's transgender employees (who are estimated to make up at least 2% of the working population) that they are valued by their employer—an outcome that is important to all psychological contracts between employer and employee.

In order to highlight the ways in which transgender stigmatization unfolds in the real world, we close this section with a case study. In 2016, the EEOC settled a court case with Bojangles Restaurants, Inc., a corporation in North Carolina which operates a chain of fast food restaurants. A transgender woman reported to the EEOC that she was subjected to a harassing work environment based on her gender expression and personal appearance. She was also encouraged by her supervisors and coworkers to change her gender expression to align with male stereotypes given that her biological sex was male. She reported her experiences on at least two occasions, but her reports were ignored. When she reported the behavior to the EEOC, she was fired. The EEOC ruled that she was subjected to a discriminatory work environment based on expectations for her gender expression. She won the case and Bojangles Restaurants was required to pay a penalty as well as direct reparations to her. Not only was Bojangles found guilty of sex discrimination, but it was also in violation of EEOC law, which prohibits the dismissal of employees due to retaliation stemming from filing EEOC complaints. The Bojangles case is important given it provides some useful takeaways for preventing behaviors that contribute to hostile workplaces for transgender or gender nonconforming individuals and avoiding costly legal ramifications for organizations.

The remainder of this article will focus on ways in which organizations can create transgender inclusive work environments and how managers can support individual employees who express gender non-normatively or who are going through the process of transitioning from one gender to another. Such initiatives may also create a friendlier environment for all employees given that gender expression also varies across individuals who are not transgender identified. Offering a wider range of acceptable expressions of gender may promote a more accepting climate for any employee who expresses (or does not express) gender at work, regardless of whether their expression is conventional or not.

ORGANIZATIONAL BEST PRACTICES FOR GENDER EXPRESSION AT WORK

In order for organizations to create safe spaces for employees to express their gender authentically, it is vital to create a proximal policy that specifically covers discrimination based on gender identity and expression. This step, while simple, is important in promoting inclusivity and combating discrimination. Further, creating "best in class" inclusive workplaces, which are supportive of all stigmatized groups and not just those which are explicitly covered by Title VII, is part of an intelligent diversity and inclusion strategy. As the workforce becomes more diverse and as workplace cultures become more transparent (e.g., through websites like Glassdoor), it is increasingly important for organizations to view diversity and inclusion as a key element in their business strategy. While current EEOC law covers sex discrimination, and transgender employees can be covered under this section of Title IIV at times, it does not cover cases in which it is unclear that gender expectations are the source of harassment. For example, if a transgender person is harassed over something other than physical appearance, but the harassment still originates from their transgender status, they are less likely to be protected under EEOC law. Thus, including specific coverage for gender identity and expression in organizational policy, providing protection beyond that afforded by Title VII, would provide employees with legal recourse regardless of the basis of harassment.

When employees know that they have an avenue for recourse if their coworkers display hostile or discriminatory behaviors, attitudes toward the company and the job often increase. Protecting employees from stigma may also put them at ease when deciding whether to authentically display their gender. Indeed, prior studies show that protective policies and social support tend to reduce individuals' fear of discrimination at work (e.g., of being fired from one's job or being evaluated poorly due to bias stemming from demographic characteristics) and enhance their disclosure of an invisible stigmatized identity. However, given employees are much more likely face stigma due to gender expression if they actively express gender in a way that violates normative gender expectations, they may elect not to express gender authentically in hostile or ambiguous environments, choosing instead to live with the fear that comes with "closeting" a personal identity.

Second, it is critical to include information about gender identity and expression in diversity training. Although many trainings cover gender discrimination, it is less common that they contain information on gender outside of the traditional cases involving sex (male and female). Explicitly covering

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issues of gender expression sends a message to employees that such information is important, but it also serves to raise awareness about gender expression on a broader scale. Lack of awareness of the numerous challenges and level of stigma faced by many transgender employees and a lack of contact with individuals who express gender in non-normative ways can lead to misconceptions and a promulgation of inappropriate or inaccurate perceptions of the transgender and genderqueer community. For example, if Bojangles Restaurants had offered training for employees about gender identity, they may have been able to educate managers about gender expression and promote empathy for gender non-conforming individuals. Thus, organizations that actively educate their workforce on these issues should observe lower levels of explicit, and maybe even implicit, bias toward those who express gender in unconventional ways. And finally, it is helpful to organize employee resource groups for gender non-conforming individuals. These groups might inform future trainings and interventions that serve to increase inclusivity and awareness of gender expression discrimination.

Third, organizations should also include information about the difference between sexual orientation and gender expression in diversity training. Because many companies neglect to include this distinction in trainings, employees are often left confused and unsure of the links between the two. They may also be left wondering what pronouns should be used when referring to gender non-conforming individuals and may feel uneasy initiating these conversations with coworkers unless they are given the tools and language to do so. Encouraging employees to have conversations about preferred pronouns and to be accepting of gender identity variability fosters a more accepting culture from the bottom up.

Moreover, conflating sexuality with gender expression is particularly damaging when determining how to communicate issues around bathroom usage for gender non-conforming individuals. If employees believe that sexual orientation is linked with gender expression, they may be more hesitant to share bathroom space with transgender individuals. Indeed, there seems to be a false, public narrative that transgender individuals seek to use bathrooms of their opposite biological sex in order to "spy" on or otherwise gain access to same-sex individuals who they are sexually attracted to. This is a common argument that has been used to deny transgender employees bathroom access. However, by highlighting the difference between sexual orientation and gender expression and explaining bathroom access as an issue involving the latter, not the former, organizations may allay some of the concerns that employees may have with sharing bathrooms with gender non-conforming individuals. Moreover, it is important to highlight the reality that employees currently share bathrooms with those who are attracted to members of the same-sex, but who express gender in conventional ways (i.e., LGB people). Further, these shared spaces have not led to increased personal danger or other negative outcomes to the public. As such, the notion that transgender employees should not use bathrooms that align with their gender identity conflates sexual orientation and gender expression and is not valid in denying them bathroom usage.

Fourth, and related, by denying transgender people access to bathrooms that align with their gender identity, employers render such situations highly embarrassing to such individuals and make it exceedingly difficult for other employees to view them as the gender they wish to align with. While arguments have been made that allowing individuals to use bathrooms that align with their gender identity will encourage all males and females to use opposite gender bathrooms on a whim, using a bathroom that is not in alignment with one's biological sex represents a political act that may be highly stigmatized depending on the context. As such, the idea that individuals would freely decide to use a bathroom that does not align with their sex, without identifying as gender non-conforming, is very unlikely. Creating gender neutral bathrooms is one way to address this issue, but it is more inclusive to allow employees to share spaces with those who share their gender identity, as opposed to creating "separate but equal" spaces for gender non-conforming people.

Fifth, dress codes also play a key role in determining how comfortable employees may be in authentically expressing their gender at work. "Best in class" organizations with respect to transgender inclusivity have created gender-neutral dress codes, which involve identifying professional attire and then creating guidelines around what items are deemed appropriate, regardless of gender. For example, if modest dresses are consider suitable work attire, anyone who desires to wear them to work may do so, regardless of sex. In this way, organizations pre-empt potential legal ramifications of requiring particular forms of dress for biological men and women, which runs the risk of violating Title VII (as highlighted in the EEOC v. Bojangles Restaurants case). By creating a gender-neutral dress code, the metric is professionalism, not gender conformity. This allows companies to create inclusive environments with regard to employee attire and also avoids lawsuits stemming from gender discrimination claims. Thus, gender-neutral dress codes are preferable to no dress code or a gendered dress code, both legally and socially, for gender non-conforming individuals and organizations that support them.

Sixth, providing health-related benefits and organizational support for transitioning transgender individuals also reflects a "best practice" in companies that focus on gender expression inclusivity. For example, large firms, such as Boeing, Google, Chevron, and Johnson and Johnson have all recognized the need to address issues related to gender realignment processes at work and have taken active steps in promoting smooth transitions for their transgender employees. This is important given, in many cases, transgender people who elect to have surgery are fearful to tell their employer due to fear of backlash or discrimination. Ensuring that employees will be treated with compassion when inquiring about transition benefits makes a huge difference in the work-life balance of transgender employees going through the transition process. Being understanding of the time that they may need to spend in recovery from surgery, as well as the possible side effects of taking hormones (if a part of their transition), also sends the message that the organization is truly supportive of those who wish to transition while at work. Because many transitioning employees are looking for employers who will support them in their transition, companies who provide benefits or guidance for transitioning employees will better attract talented people from the gender non-conforming community.

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Seventh, much of the backlash toward transgender and gender non-conforming individuals stems from the fact that many people have never knowingly met an individual from these communities, instead relying on biased assumptions and prejudicial beliefs passed on to them by others. Thus, we recommend that employers have a transgender trainer visit their workplace to talk about their journey with gender and to convey their struggles with being gender authentic at work. Additionally, having an external presenter visit your organization also takes the pressure off of transgender workers to make others aware of their circumstances and the challenges of being transgender. However, if they are interested in sharing their stories and experiences with their coworkers, this is also an impactful way to create commitment to transgender inclusivity. Indeed, prior research on "the contact hypothesis" suggests it is much easier to ignore discriminatory events toward a particular group if you do not personally know anyone from that group. However, if organizations can increase the number of people that the average employee knows from the gender non-conforming community, the chances that employees will truly commit to changing the work environment should increase.

Finally, organizations should aim to promote gender expression inclusivity across organizational functions. For example, HR should be responsible for creating effective trainings which educate employees about diversity in gender expression. However, marketing functions should also think about how to actively promote an inclusive culture externally. If gender non-conforming job candidates see themselves reflected in the externally facing materials that companies leverage, then they will feel more supported in their ability to be authentic. Further, the presence of these images amongst many competitor images, which may be more gender normative, also sends a strong societal message that images of gender non-conforming individuals are accepted and desirable within your organization—and potentially on an even broader scale. Further, legal departments should think more broadly about providing better benefits and legal protections than are currently required by becoming leaders in formal organizational support for gender non-conforming individuals. In this way, gender expression inclusivity becomes part of the fabric of the organization and is not just an "HR" initiative. While HR initiatives can certainly take hold, it can take a more organized effort to overcome negative or even neutral sentiments toward gender diversity.

INDIVIDUAL INTERVENTIONS FOR GENDER NON-CONFORMING EMPLOYEES

While organizations interested in gender inclusivity should focus on creating larger shifts in their organizational culture, it may be unrealistic to assume that all stigma and prejudice faced by transgender and gender non-conforming employees can be rooted out completely, at least in the relative short-term. As such, a comprehensive strategy for managing issues surrounding gender expression at work might also include more individually-targeted interventions that support transgender and gender non-conforming employees who do encounter obstacles related to their authentic gender expression at work.

First, there is some initial evidence that mindfulness may help individuals to overcome the negative thoughts and emotions associated with workplace discrimination. Mindfulness refers to a state of nonjudgmental attentiveness to and awareness of moment-to-moment events and internal experiences (thoughts, emotions, sensations, etc.) and has been linked to a wide range of positive outcomes, including enhanced psychological wellbeing, physical health, and behavioral functioning. Mindfulness varies naturally between individuals (i.e., some individuals are more mindful than others). Yet, research suggests mindfulness is quite malleable and able to be trained through targeted interventions, including meditation and mindfulness-based stress reduction programs.

In mindfulness training, individuals learn techniques that help them focus their attention, in an accepting and nonjudgmental manner, on events and experiences occurring in the present moment. Over time, individuals develop an enhanced capacity to refocus on the present, rather than dwelling on the past or fantasizing about the future. In turn, mindfulness is thought to allow one to separate, or "disidentify", themselves from stressful events and distressing thoughts/emotions and to appraise these external and internal experiences from a more objective, less judgmental, perspective. In so doing, mindfulness is believed to cultivate individuals' resilience in the face of environmental stressors, especially those that are interpersonal in nature. It is argued that these stress-buffering effects stem from the ability of mindfulness to promote recognition of others' negative behavior as stemming from complex causes that may not be based in reality or in meaningful aspects of oneself. In essence, experiences of mistreatment are reframed as a "you" rather than a "me" problem.

Relevant to the present discussion, the authors of this article found in a recent study of transgender employees' work experiences that mindfulness was associated with reduced levels of daily rumination, hypervigilance, and sinister attribution tendencies in response to daily experiences of discrimination at work. Put differently, mindfulness seemed to buffer transgender employees from perseverating on daily encounters with prejudice at work and reduced their tendencies to become overly vigilant and suspicious around their colleagues the following workday. In turn, these individuals were less likely to suffer from daily emotional exhaustion and job dissatisfaction, seemingly as a result of their reduced reactivity to stigma-related stressors at work. A notable strength of this study was that it followed over 100 transgender employees across two workweeks, lending support to the potential benefits of mindfulness in buffering transgender employees against the dysfunctional thoughts that often result from daily encounters with workplace discrimination.

Additionally, mindfulness training has been linked to a greater willingness to authentically display one's true self at work. The idea here is that the detached observation developed in mindfulness training allows individuals to become more in tune with their inner values and to avoid previously conditioned ways of responding, thereby increasing their tendency to behave in accordance with their true, or authentic, selves. As such, for gender non-conforming individuals, mindfulness training may promote self-affirmation of one's chosen gender identity, increase one's willingness to be

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gender authentic at work, and foster resilience in the face of those who may react negatively to one's authentic expression of gender. Offering mindfulness training or encouraging the use of mindfulness applications on smartphones or computers may therefore be a useful strategy for promoting the wellbeing of gender non-conforming employees. To be clear, while mindfulness is more of a "band-aid" solution in the sense that it does *not* address the root causes of prejudice and stigma, it may be nonetheless helpful in controlling the damage stemming from prejudicial experiences and in offering care to those who have been ostracized and discriminated against. Thus, we recommend that employers consider mindfulness training as a resource that employees can draw upon should they encounter hardships or mistreatment associated with their gender identity.

Second, gender non-conforming individuals, particularly transgender employees in transition, may face enormous pressures from individuals in their personal lives to deny their gender identity and to continue to express gender in conventional ways. For this reason, HR must be understanding of specific work-life needs of employees who undergo the transition process. Just as coworkers may feel sympathetic toward an employee who is going through a divorce, for example, the work-life challenges of transgender employees must also be recognized. Many transgender individuals face severe rejection from family and friends during and after transition. Because these individuals often feel alone in their struggles with gender, they are more likely to become depressed, anxious, or even suicidal during this period of time. Yet, a little bit of empathy at work can go a long way. Further, in addition to empathy, it is also critical to make reasonable accommodations for individuals who are managing work and life during the transition process. Creating policies that humanize all employees, including individuals who transition at work, may foster attraction and retention of gender non-conforming talent, outcomes that are obviously important to any firm's bottom line.

Additionally, it is also important to keep a pulse on the culture surrounding gender non-conformity in the organization. Building survey items within diversity and inclusion inventories that directly address gender expression can help in this regard. Further, having conversations with individuals who have "come out" about their gender identity can be highly impactful. Giving voice to employees who may feel alone in the organization shows a commitment to their comfort and wellbeing and may contribute to a more accepting environment through increased awareness of issues faced by such individuals at work. Creating communication outlets is also important given it may be unlikely that issues surrounding discrimination and hostility get reported unless individuals are directly asked. Indeed, gender non-conforming individuals may not want to draw further attention to themselves by reporting these issues. Even in organizations where employees report discriminatory behavior, like the the EEOC v. Bojangles lawsuit case, these complaints can be ignored if managers are not encouraged to participate in these conversations. Thus, actively creating open lines of communication is important to understanding the challenges that this population may face on a daily basis. Without this knowledge, organizations cannot create truly inclusive work environments.

Up until this point, we have not highlighted the role of allies in creating safe and inclusive workspaces for gender non-conforming individuals. However, allies are vital in shifting an organization's culture. To create real change, an organization needs to embrace the "silent majority" within its employee base. Most employees do not want to create a negative work environment for others, but they are often unsure how to actively promote positive ones. As such, they tend to remain passive. However, engaging this inactive majority is a missed opportunity to drive workplace culture. Indeed, preliminary evidence from a recent study conducted by the present authors shows that even observing one courageous act at work in support of transgender employees can increase these individuals' workplace attitudes and reduce their fears of being gender authentic at work. This means that having just one employee who is willing to stand up in the face of transgender discrimination can go a long way in promoting transgender employees' satisfaction with their jobs, decreasing their turnover intentions, and enhancing their willingness to enact their gender identity at work. Delivering targeted ally training can serve to empower those who are gender-conforming to promote inclusivity for all forms of gender expression at work.

Teaching allies how to stand *with* gender non-conforming employees, instead of speaking *for* them, may further allow for collaboration and communication across different demographic groups with the explicit aim of increasing inclusivity. This means that allies must ask questions of gender non-conforming employees about what they can do to support them, listen to their responses, and enact behaviors that support these goals. It also means that gender non-conforming individuals may be at the forefront of the movement for workplace equality, but that allies should join with them and offer their support when it is needed. Engaging allies and gender non-conforming employees in conversation with one another will decrease bias, increase understanding and allow for a more unified culture of acceptance and harmony. As with any training, evaluation of the outcomes of ally training is also key. Measuring attitudes toward gender non-conforming individuals and the workplace environment with regard to gender expression inclusivity are possible metrics that might be assessed pre- and post-training in order to ensure that ally training is having a lasting impact. It is easy to imagine that employees might feel very differently about their workplaces if contingencies of supportive employees exist, even amongst other less supportive colleagues. Holding employees accountable for inclusivity via performance management systems will also send a strong message to current and possible allies that creating a positive work experience for all employees is a vital part of the business strategy, not just a diversity strategy.

CONCLUSIONS

As awareness of gender non-conformity becomes more salient in society, organizations will continue to grapple with how to appropriately address the various work-related challenges and concerns surrounding this unique employee population. However, it is not enough to wait for federal and state law to dictate how gender non-conforming employees are treated at work. Organizations that are serious about

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being inclusive need to take active steps to implement positive organizational practices and to provide resources for gender non-conforming workers, as well as current or possible allies, without these actions being required by law. By sending the message that gender non-conformity is embraced, employees will feel greater freedom to express their gender authentically, leaving them free to perform their work duties without the cognitive burden associated with monitoring their work environment for threats and with concealing their identities.

This brings us to an important point—although the gender non-conforming population only makes up about 2% of the current population in the U.S. (with an estimated 7 million transgender individuals worldwide), embracing gender non-conformity actually may have positive effects for all employees. For example, in an environment where a variety of gender expressions are embraced, gender conforming individuals may also feel free to express non-stereotypical behaviors that may cut down on stigma broadly. Thus, women may feel free to express stereotypically masculine behaviors, such as being assertive, and men may feel free to engage in stereotypically feminine behaviors, such as communality. Being open toward gender non-conformity therefore may have broad implications for the ways in which all employees enact gender at work, whether they identify as conforming or not.

By following the guidelines set forth in this article (outlined in Table 1), organizations will be able to stay ahead of the curve with regard to efforts to de-stigmatize non-normative gender expression. With each new civil rights movement, we create new societal norms that become part of the social fabric of our everyday lives. Suffragettes fought for gender equality, Martin Luther King and his followers fought for racial equality, and droves of people have more recently fought for the rights of LGB and transgender individuals. While it is difficult, upon reflection, to imagine how individuals could have ever argued against women's right to vote or Black students' ability to attend school with Whites, we are currently making similar arrangements for gender non-conforming people with regard to separate but equal bathroom facilities, forced gender conformity, and a lack of equal protections for such individuals under the law. As such, we believe that all organizations should use the above recommendations in order to become "frontrunners" with respect to gender expression inclusivity. Those that stay ahead of the "inclusivity curve" will be able to better attract and retain talent, motivate all employees to do their best, and, most importantly, create better lives for those who express their gender in ways that are unconventional, but true to themselves.

Table 1 Best practices for organizational gender expression inclusivity

Best practices—organizational level
1. Create organizational non-discrimination policies that include gender identity and expression
2. Institute diversity training which includes gender identity and expression, as well as material that outlines the difference between sexual orientation and gender expression
3. Create inclusive bathroom policies to incorporate the full spectrum of gender expression
4. Institute gender neutral dress codes
5. Ensure that benefits are offered for individuals undergoing gender transition
6. Increase employee contact with members of the transgender community
7. Incorporate gender expression inclusivity across organizational functions (legal, marketing, HR, etc.)
Best practices—individual level
1. Offer mindfulness training or provide suggestions about how to locate stress management programs/trainings for those encountering discrimination or hostility stemming from gender expression
2. Ensure compassion from HR surrounding unique work-life needs stemming from gender transition
3. Measure individual attitudes about gender identity/behaviors toward those with non-traditional forms of gender expression within the general employee population
4. Measure and encourage ally behaviors within the general employee population

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Katina Sawyer earned a dual-Ph.D. and Master's degree in Industrial/Organizational Psychology and Women's Studies from The Pennsylvania State University. She holds a B.S. in Psychology from Villanova University. Katina is an Assistant Professor in the Graduate Programs in HRD within the Psychology Department at Villanova University.

Christian Thoroughgood holds both a Ph.D. and an M.S. in Industrial/Organizational Psychology from the Pennsylvania State University, and a B.A. in Psychology and Economics from the University of Maryland. Christian is an Assistant Professor in the Graduate Programs in HRD within the Psychology Department at Villanova University.

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