

Putting the T in LGBT

A Launch Point for Trans Inclusion in Queer Advocacy Groups¹

In the last decade many lesbian, gay, and bisexual advocacy groups have seen themselves increasingly as part of a larger movement which includes transgender and gender variant people and have begun to describe their focus as "LGBT." But expanding focus from eliminating discrimination based on sexual orientation to include issues of gender identity and expression has been a learning experience for many an activist! We hope the following tips will aid your organization can better welcome and advocate for trans community members.

Day-to-Day Operations

An essential step to trans inclusion is to create a trans-friendly atmosphere in the physical space of your organization. Whether you have your own office or just use a meeting space, it is important that it be accessible to transgender members. Here are some suggestions on how to create a welcoming atmosphere.

Watch your language.

People tend, for the sake of brevity, to refer to LGBT organizations with terms like "the gay team." Ask yourself whether this language is true to the mission of the organization and whether it represents the entire membership. Consider the same question when choosing titles for events, programs, discussion groups, etc.

Have protocols for addressing anti-trans behavior.

In order for your office to be a safe space, you need a system to address situations that cause transfolk to feel threatened. You don't need to kick anybody out, but occasionally people need to be educated about how their behavior makes people feel. Do this consistently and promptly. Be prepared to address hostile and/or transphobic behavior on the spot even if there is a trans person present. It can be tiring for transfolk to always be expected to confront inappropriate behavior.

Be sensitive.

When addressing concerns about anti-trans language or behavior, make sure that the person who has brought up this concern is comfortable with the action taken. If behavior needs to be addressed immediately, this might require a quick judgment call. Mistakes are not the end of the world, just make sure to check in with the concerned individual afterward.

Be proactive.

It may be helpful to have conversations at your group meetings on topics like how to be a good trans ally and how to make your office a trans-inclusive space. Dedicating meeting time to this issue will demonstrate that it is important to you. It will also bring your broader constituency into the conversation and cause them to feel invested in it.

Learn good ally behavior and model it consistently.

As a leader it is your responsibility to be a role model and demonstrate your dedication to being an ally. Better educating yourself on trans issues and etiquette can be an asset to your group

Be consistent in your support of trans people and trans issues.

Dedicate the same amount of time and resources to trans issues that you would to an issue affecting any other part of the LGBT community. Bring up the "trans angle" of every issue that is discussed. For example, a discussion of same-sex marriage could

1 Adapted from USSA Transgender Inclusion Guide

be furthered by discussing how the issue affects trans people, or a discussion of racism within the queer community could include the differences and similarities between how racism affects transgender communities and how it affects the lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities.

Don't tokenize your trans membership.

Having a few transfolk who regularly attend meetings or events is great, but it doesn't mean your work is done or that your space is completely trans-inclusive. Additionally, tokenism is frustrating and it is very unlikely that your trans membership will stay involved for very long.

Recognize diversity within the trans community.

All too often, when organizing around an identity-specific issue such as being LGBT, we are asked to check the other aspects of ourself at the door including our race, ethnicity, ability, immigrant status, class, etc. It is the multiplicity of our beings that prevent us from being able to identify "the transgender experience." For instance, the fact that one transgender person is white and another is Latina, or that one is gay and another straight can change how each experiences their gender identity. All our identities inform and influence how we experience our lives.

Avoid the "Oppression Olympics"

Although it is imperative to acknowledge all of the various identities we encompass as individuals, it is equally important that we do not allow this to devolve into a competition of who is oppressed more, otherwise known as "Oppression Olympics." Such a competition is never beneficial and often undermines any work and organizing that you are involved with. Acknowledging someone's holistic identity does not mean oppressions must or can be ranked. It just means recognizing that people experience oppression differently.

Address the needs of diverse membership.

If your organization is attempting to address issues that transgender people face, then to be effective you must also address the struggles of low-income individuals, people of color, immigrants, people with disabilities, etc. because transgender people fall into all of these categories. Likewise, transgender people in these communities are often disproportionately hurt by transphobic attitudes and policy. Acknowledging the different aspects of transpeople's experience and identities not only makes it easier to address their struggles, but also provides wonderful opportunities for coalition building.

Building Trans-Positive Staff/Leadership

Beyond creating a safe, welcoming space in your organization, making sure leaders in a group are well versed in trans issues can be key. The following are some simple procedures that people looking to recruit and train staff for their organization can follow to secure people in key positions who are knowledgeable and sensitive to transgender issues.

Hire transgender and genderqueer identified people.

An obvious and usually most overlooked option is to recruit and retain transgender volunteers and staff to your organization. Create a strategic plan in order to outreach, and advertise that you encourage transgender people to apply. Also, consider an affirmative action plan and policy regarding transgender people to better organize and plan your efforts.

Create scenarios for candidates to answer that gauge their competence on transgender issues.

Presenting problem scenarios to candidates can offer a unique opportunity to assess an individual's response to various situations. Also, it is a good tactic in evaluating a person's immediate reaction to certain situations.

Make sure that job descriptions are clear in requiring work on transgender issues, recruitment, and retention.

Adding this as a component to a job description is a strategic way of institutionalizing change beyond the time you will be in your organization.

Facilitate Staff Development on Trans Issues

It is important whether you are in charge of staff, or are volunteers trying to keep resource center or organization staff accountable, that a standard be established for personnel to always pursue further understanding and knowledge on issues. Staff development is critical for any office or organization to evolve to serve its clientele or constituency.

During staff retreats, trainings, or meetings there should be a discussion as to how transgender issues are being addressed whether it is from the perspective of a lobby organization, a queer resource center, or a support group. Other possibilities for facilitating staff development as allies is to create a budget for bringing in speakers or trainers to better equip your staff with the skills and knowledge to address and organize around transgender oppression. If it is possible, attempt to form a transgender student focus group where transgender students are able to comment, critique, and advise student government, queer organizations and university offices as how to better service their community.

Implement Trans-Inclusive Policy

Adopting an official policy of transgender inclusion and support is both the most and the least important step your organization can take. It is the most important because it sends an official message about your organizational values and because it will outlast your administration and set a precedent for your organization's future. It is the least important because a policy that is well-meaning, but poorly articulated or not followed, will do nothing to increase your effectiveness in addressing trans issues. Write a policy that's specific enough to speak to all the needs of your organization and then follow it. You may want to build-in an annual (or more often) review of your policy so it can change as your organization does.

Keep in mind that a good policy should inform what your group does, but can't stand by itself. This policy will take the time and commitment of everyone in your organization. For example, if you have a men's or women's group, a policy where people self-select which group they attend is a good place to start. However, it will take the active participation of everyone involved to create a space where transfolk feel comfortable talking about their experiences, and where others feel comfortable responding to those experiences in a sympathetic way.

Trans-Inclusive Action

As with any under-represented group, the best way to increase trans participation and leadership in your organization is to do work on and around issues that the gender-variant community is interested in. This section addresses specific programming and campaigns.

Programming

One of the best ways for your group to address the needs of transgender/genderqueer members is programming that specifically addresses their issues. Trans-focused programming is important not only because it helps members of the trans community feel more comfortable in your space, but also because it can start conversations about

transgender issues, inclusion, and experiences among your broader constituency. "Trans 101"-type workshops and panel presentations are excellent ways to start these conversations. Bringing in speakers is also fun and effective, but keep in mind that good trans speakers are fewer and farther between than usual. When writing your budget account for the possibility of higher travel costs.

few trans-specific events per year are great, but it is equally important to make sure that all of your regular programming is trans-inclusive. Consider issues such as gendered space and language in your events. You may also want to provide space or resources specifically for the trans community, such as a discussion or support group.

As a queer organization, remember that it is impossible to universally apply the experiences of LGB people onto transfolk. While LGB people and trans people have many similar experiences, we face different oppressions. Many LGB groups attempt trans inclusion by adding "T" to the name of their organization or event. While this is important, it is not enough. The event must also be structured and administered in a way that is pertinent to transpeople, or have a specific and well-integrated trans component.

Direct Action Campaigns

There are so many things our communities could be doing (and most likely aren't) to make sure that trans people are treated respectfully and fairly. A strategic and well-executed direct action campaign can make a world of difference for trans community members. If you are stumped for issues, you might consider working with your city, county, or prominent institutions such as schools, major employers, etc. to add gender identity and expression to their nondiscrimination policy, or to develop policies that would make transfolk safe and comfortable in spaces like restrooms, locker rooms, and shelters. Are any health/counseling professionals educated about and sensitive to trans issues? Some grassroots groups host fund raising parties to help low-income trans people acquire gender-appropriate documentation or surgeries. Any of these issues would make a good campaign.

Supporting Trans Communities and Campaigns

When taking on a campaign or putting on an event relevant to the lives of transgender community members, it is important to check in with transgender advocacy groups/leaders/support organizations in your area. It is always better to let a community speak for itself, but we cannot take it for granted that the trans people in your community will be in a position to do so. They may not be organized enough, it may not be safe for them to come out, or they simply may not have the numbers. Transfolk should be empowered to be at the forefront when possible. However, when the alternative is doing nothing, it is often best to cautiously move toward trans-inclusive policies and programs.

There is really no easy way to discern when a campaign shifts from being proactive to being disempowering other than to do everything you can to ensure that trans voices are heard in your campaigns. The important thing is to remember that your organizing will be most effective if trans folk are involved. Direct action organizing is all about empowering people to make change for themselves, even when this is difficult. Empowering, effective organizing will involve trans voices and energy as well as that of proactive, dedicated allies.

In areas where trans people do have organizations and positions of leadership in advocacy groups, it might be more effective to ask what campaigns are already underway and how your organization can contribute to its success. In places where there are not well established trans organizations or leadership, it can also be effective to assess what resource trans community members would need to organize their own campaigns or develop their own advocacy organizations.