

How Gay-Friendly Should Your Workplace Be?

Michael Zigarelli

Excerpted from *Management by Proverbs*, B&H Publishing © 2009

Sean pulled into the parking lot, found a spot and then pointed the rear-view mirror toward his tie. Not perfect, but it never would be. Programmers don't do ties that often. No big deal, he thought gathering his interview materials. These guys aren't going to judge me on my tie anyway.

Inside the building, the headquarters of Master's Software Solutions, the group that would interview Sean assembled in the conference room. Adorning the walls was an assortment of Chamber of Commerce awards and Christian artwork. The depiction of Jesus with a laptop was particularly intriguing and usually provided a nice ice-breaker for the interviews.

Master's, a company of 53 employees, was proudly run on Judeo-Christian values. It had always been run this way, ever since its founding twenty years ago by Walt DeVries, a seminarian-turned-entrepreneur and self-described "geek for God." And although the company's commitment to those values had never wavered, today's events would test something even deeper than the commitment—they would test what the company values actually *mean*.

Walt had participated in every interview since establishing the company, whether they were recruiting a vice-president or a secretary. He even insisted on having input into which interns Master's would accept from the local university. But otherwise, Walt was no micromanager and certainly no autocrat. Rather, he saw himself as a shepherd, caring

for his employee flock, wanting to know each “sheep” personally. He also wanted to ensure the quality of the flock, so to speak, and the corporate culture of Master’s; hence the meticulous attention to staffing.

As Walt entered the conference room, he greeted the three other members of the hiring committee: two software engineers in their late 20s, Dave Anderson and Jeanie Winters, and the company’s Chief Operating Officer, Bill Maxwell. Self-effacing but brilliant, Bill was Walt’s first employee and the only MBA at Master’s. In fact, Walt credited Bill with having saved the company on a number of occasions from making unwise business decisions, some of which could have sunk the once-fledgling start-up.

Walt closed the door and smiled at his team as he sat. “Thanks for coming everyone,” he began with customary genuineness. “And a special thanks to you, Jeanie, for boiling down the resumes to these five candidates. As you know, we’re going to do a group interview with each one this morning and then do individual interviews later today. So is there anything you want to discuss before Theresa shows in the first guy?”

Dave spoke right up. “Well, his resume shows he’s qualified—he practically got a 4.0 in college and he’s worked for three years at Microsoft. But what’s with all this *gay* stuff at the bottom of the resume? ‘President of the Gay-Lesbian-Bisexual Club’ in college? ‘Member of GLEAM: the Gay and Lesbian Employees at Microsoft’? ‘Member of Digital Queers?’ *Digital Queers*? I don’t understand why we’re even interviewing this guy. This is a Christian company, run on Christian values. It’s in our mission statement. It’s in how we operate. It’s even in the artwork on the walls. This seems like a no-brainer to me that we shouldn’t have invited him today.”

Dave wasn’t one to mince words. But neither was Jeanie. “You can’t be serious,”

she replied with a set of non-verbals that punctuated her irritation. “That’s the same as saying that we think it’s acceptable to discriminate against African-Americans or women!”

“Excuse me, but it’s not even *close* to the same thing,” Dave shot back. This was getting uncharacteristically emotional for a Master’s discussion, but Jeanie had touched a sensitive chord. “Look, you didn’t choose to be female and I didn’t choose to be black!”

“And they don’t choose to be gay.” Jeanie returned calmly, considering it checkmate.

Gloves off, Dave raised his voice a half-notch. “No way. *No way*. You can’t compare their struggle for acceptance with ours. And regardless the choice issue, there’s nothing in the Bible that says it’s a sin to be black or a sin to be a woman. But there’s plenty in there that says the practice of homosexuality is a sin.”

Bill interjected in the interest of focus. “Look, we’re getting a little off track here. This is just about whether we should be hiring this one guy.”

“But actually, Bill, it’s not,” explained Dave. “It’s about what inevitably follows when we compromise our principles. If we don’t take a Christian stand on this, then we’re letting a secular society drive our decision-making, and ultimately our corporate policies. And when we do that, we lose our distinctives.”

“Oh, so now bias is a Christian distinctive?” winced Jeanie. “I swear, Dave, you’ve gotta listen to yourself sometimes. This is why people stereotype us Christians the way they do.”

Walt finally reeled them in. “Folks, I understand that you have some strong opinions about this, but we should have a more reasoned discussion here. Now, Jeanie,

I've always admired the depth of your faith. So help me to understand why you *don't* think this guy is a problem for us."

"Sure, Walt," Jeanie answered, regaining her composure. "Here's how I see it. This company operates on Christian values, right? We consider God in every decision we make. And that's as it should be. So we need to do that here as well. My read of the Bible tells me that God doesn't play favorites—that *non-discrimination* is a Christian value. Everyone's created in the image of God and so everyone's entitled to be treated with love, respect, and fairness. In business, then, I think we just need to consider people on their merits. We have absolutely no place judging people the way Dave is judging them."

Despite the insult, Dave gently offered his best rejoinder. "Can I interject something here? I'd be the last person to advocate arbitrary discrimination. It's ugly and I know first hand, it hurts. But there *is* such a thing as *legitimate* discrimination. We do it all the time if an applicant or employee doesn't embrace our corporate values. If we follow the path that Jeanie's suggesting, we're helping to normalize a lifestyle that God condemns. And if you ask me, *that's* more wrong than 'discriminating' against this applicant."

With a slight raise of his hand, soft-spoken Bill came at it from another angle. "Can I jump in here real quick? I don't know about the Bible issues and all that, but what I can tell you is this. Technically it's not illegal in this state to consider sexual preference in hiring decisions, but it's not smart either. There are a lot of homosexuals in the software industry. *A lot*. And if word gets around that we discriminate, we could lose some of our top commercial customers.

"What I'm saying," Bill clarified, "is that gay-friendly has become an industry

norm. Just look at all the gay affinity groups in software companies and how pervasive domestic partner benefits have become. Like it or not, we have to recognize that if we don't become gay-friendly too, over time we're going to be at a competitive disadvantage. So maybe we should just hire the best and brightest we can find."

"That a good point, my friend," Walt said with a smile. "But I have to admit, I think I'm with Dave on this one. And if our business has to take a hit to do what's right in God's eyes, well, that's a cost of doing business God's way."

Jeanie was incredulous. "So that's it?!" she asked rhetorically. "We tell Mr. Superstar Applicant here—a guy with *unbelievable* potential to move this company forward—to take a hike because we don't like who he sleeps with? And on top of that we risk losing some of our B-to-B customers? That makes no sense at all to me."

"Look, Jeanie," Walt responded, now provoked by her tone, "non-discrimination might sound innocuous—even godly to some—but a 'neutral' non-discrimination stance is not really neutral at all. It implicitly validates the lifestyle. And once we do that, then as a company and as a society we proceed down a very slippery slope."

Walt continued, but now in a more didactic tone. This was turning into a quintessential shepherding moment for him. "What I mean is this: Non-discrimination implies there's nothing wrong with the behavior. That leads to demands for equal treatment, which in turn leads to insistence on things like domestic partner benefits and sensitivity training for employees. It's how gay marriage and gay adoption are becoming 'civil rights' in parts of this country. Ultimately, we end up with a culture that condones what God condemns. As Christians and as a Christian company, I don't think it's wise to take even one step down that slope, whatever the cost to our business."

As she saw it, a lot was at stake here. So Jeanie made one last attempt. “Quite frankly, Walt, I don’t understand your theology on this at all. Or yours, Dave. What about the Christian calling to be witnesses, to actually introduce people to God? If we Christians are so exclusive that we never come into contact with people who are alienated from God, how will we ever bring more people into God’s family? We just isolate ourselves in this little Christian bubble: We go to a Christian church, we send our kids to Christian schools, we run Christian companies dealing with a lot of Christian clients, all of our friends are Christians, we read Christian books and magazines. We’re becoming separatists. We’ve developed our own comfortable sub-culture that insulates us from engaging people God might want us to reach.

“That’s not what Jesus did,” Jeanie continued, now as confident as she was entrenched. “In fact, he did just the opposite. He associated freely with all people, regardless of their lifestyle or their past, and through those relationships, he pointed people to God. What I think is that we should open our doors—and our minds—and do the same.”

Walt was thoughtful, his eyes reflecting the conflict in his heart. “That’s a valid point, too, Jeanie,” he conceded. “I’m left wondering, though, where Jesus would draw the line in business. At non-discrimination? At equivalent benefits? And what about the customer side of things? What happens if a gay rights group wants us to develop some software for them? Do we just do it? Wouldn’t we be advancing their movement by creating something for them?”

Nobody spoke for a several seconds. Dave was tapping his pen; Jeanie and Bill were looking at the table. Walt broke the silence, framing the challenge ahead. “This is a

hard issue. *Really* hard. From a Christian perspective, just how gay-friendly should our company be?”

A knock at the door interrupted their deliberation. Theresa stuck her head in. “Sean Mitchell’s here for his 9:00 interview. Are you ready for him?” she asked.

“That’s a good question,” Walt replied, chuckling at the timing of her inquiry. “I’m not sure...But show him in anyway.”

A minute later, Sean walked in. Clean cut. Professional. Smartly dressed (except for his crooked tie). He extended a cheerful “Good Morning!” to the group. Walt stood, smiled, and shook Sean’s hand. “Good morning, Sean. Please, sit down and we’ll get started.”

What should Walt do?