

The Case of “Homophobic” Harry

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Harry read the email a second time. Then a third. Sitting back in his chair, he looked at the ceiling. It was happening again, but why should he be surprised? It seemed to be happening everywhere else too.

Maybe he should just ignore it. Maybe he should just get back to work and forget about holding the line in the culture wars. It was only costing him friends and getting him a reputation at work for being a “Bible-thumping, narrow-minded bigot” anyway. But maybe this was the moment when God wanted him to take a stand, to say “enough!” Maybe this email was somehow a prompting from God.

Harry, 28 and married with his first child on the way, knew he was feeling too emotional to do or say anything productive at the moment. So judiciously, he chose not to react. Instead he called Brian, a friend from his men’s group at church. Harry needed an ally and he needed some solid advice.

“Bri? Hey, it’s Harry. I’m not catching you at a bad time am I? ... Good. You gotta hear this man. It just showed up in my inbox from the good folks over in HR.”

Harry donned his best official-sounding voice and read the email:

“Today, October 11, is the Human Rights Campaign’s annual National Coming Out Day for people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans-gendered. If one of your co-workers elects to “come out” at work, there are several things you can do to help that person feel comfortable in sharing his/her orientation in the workplace:

- *Be supportive of the individual who wishes to share this information.*
- *Acknowledge his/her courage to publicly share this personal information.*
- *Respect the individual's privacy. Understand how broadly he/she wishes the information to be shared.*
- *Acknowledge your level of awareness of this topic, and share your personal willingness to understand.*

What can supervisors do to support their gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans-gendered employees who wish to be “out” at work?

First it was the mandatory *homophobia in the workplace* seminars last July. Then came the proposal for health benefits for gay partners in August. After that it was the gay pride march they encouraged us to attend three weeks ago. And now this.

- *Be sensitive to the employee's language in defining their personal orientation.*
- *Support the employee in displaying appropriate personal photos in the work setting.*
- *Act quickly and responsibly if any anti-gay humor or negative comments are made in the workplace.*

“I told you that you should be working in ministry,” Brian joked. “When are you gonna leave the heathens and come work with me?”

“This isn't funny, man,” Harry returned. “What can I do about this?”

“What do you mean ‘what can I do about this?’ You're just a low level supervisor, one step up from the bottom. You're nobody to them and if you make waves, you'll be looking to me for a job after all. C'mon man, you got a kid on the way. Don't be stupid. Just drop it.”

Harry was stunned, incredulous that his prayer partner and trusted friend would be so indifferent to this issue. In a hushed tone, he tried again.

“Brian, this thing has been snowballing for months around here. First they ran the mandatory ‘homophobia in the workplace’ seminars last July. Then came the proposal for health benefits for gay partners in August. After that it was the gay pride march they encouraged us to attend three weeks ago. And now this. Look, if nobody steps up to the plate here...”

“Yeah, you got a point,” Brian interrupted. “It's just like we were talking about with the group last week. You gotta stand for something...Maybe you should get it over with and come out today!”

Harry rolled his eyes but kept his irritation in check. Clearly, Brian was not the guy to lead him across the Jordan on this one.

“Hey, don't quit your day job for the comedy circuit,” Harry replied, only half hiding his regret for calling. “I gotta go man. I'll see you soon.”

After hanging up, Harry returned his eyes to the computer. This wasn't good. And he didn't want to stand idly by. But maybe Brian was right. What could one person do, especially someone near the bottom of the company food chain?

What Should Harry Do?