

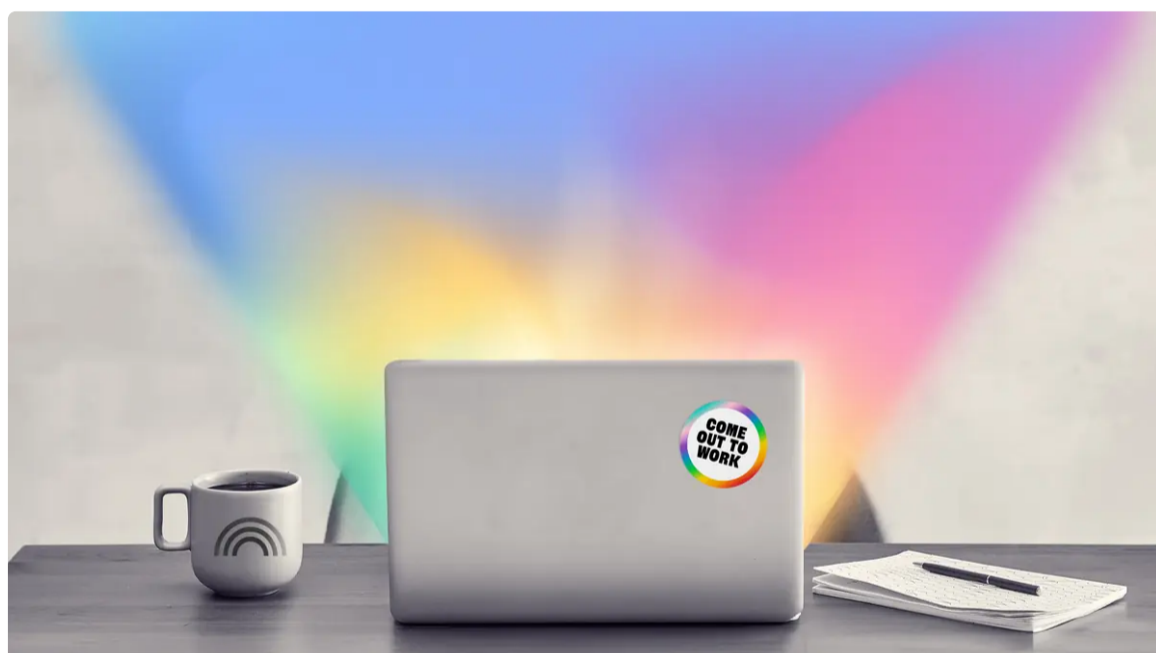
MEDIA AGENCY OF THE YEAR

THE FUTURE OF AGENCIES


DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION

LGBTQ+ Professionals Are Rewriting the Coming Out Narrative

Leaders outgrow isolated requests for tolerance by painting identity as a professional advantage



Leaders catalyze self-disclosure at work by linking queer perspectives to creativity.

 Tara McCormack, Come Out To Work



By Emmy Liederman

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When Procter & Gamble approached **Hannah Fishman**'s agency to put together a Pride campaign, she was not interested in tying self-disclosure to a timeline. Directing a room full of senior Grey Group executives away from safely spotlighting another linear coming out story, the ECD pointed to a universal experience across the LGBTQ+ community that had yet to be neatly articulated in media: "the pause."

"I take this for granted because it's my reality, but I

Emmy

CCO North America of London-based agency The&Partnership, noting that dinners with new clients always come with a moment when she has to "sort of stop and think." "I articulated it as a hesitation, and then we were all like, 'I think that's the brief,'" she continued.

P&G | The Pause

Amid a sea of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation—there have been more than 500 state bills this year that pose threats to the community, according to the Human Rights Campaign—Fishman argues that the 2020 documentation of a perpetual internal battle in P&G's ad has only become more relevant.

Nearly half of LGBTQ+ employees believe being out at work will impede their professional progress or cost them their job, according to a recent Glassdoor study. And up until three years ago, federal law fed into that fear – it wasn't until 2020 that the Supreme Court ruled LGBTQ+ workers cannot be fired on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Fear of coming out is especially relevant in the workplace, where corporate inclusion campaigns or statements of solidarity can gloss over any discomfort that lies in interpersonal communication.

Employers must recognize that while paths to self-disclosure lack uniformity, an unwavering effort to acknowledge the persistent struggles within the queer community makes coming out at work feel more feasible. When leaders treat coming out as an isolated and inconsequential request for tolerance, they ignore the ongoing realities of being queer at work, an existence that can come with both discomfort and personal power.

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“When I started my own business, it gave me

tolerate, but pivotal to my success,” said Himalaya Rao-Potlapally, a queer Indian woman and the managing director of BFM Fund, an investment fund for Black founders. “It created a foundation for who I am and actually makes me more successful.”

Celebrating the ‘queer perspective’

Alan Brown, founder and chair of creative agency DNA, first came out in a professional space because he found it more difficult to lie. But when a summer intern told him he didn't feel fully comfortable as a gay man at the company, Brown's approach to these conversations changed. He decided to become a leader who did more for his community than just admit he was a part of it.

“When I adopted my first child, my story was ‘My kids have two dads,’ and that was the first step of my progression,” said Brown. “It wasn't until seeing how many people were not out at work that I knew I need to do more than just check that box on my HR form.”

Last year during Pride, Brown launched Come Out To Work, a hub for storytelling and community-building that he hoped would elicit more safety. The initiative is grounded in the Project 47 Pledge, which asks LGBTQ+ employees to mentor another LGBTQ+ employee for one hour per month. The pledge has been signed by holding companies and agencies including WPP, Omnicom and Giant Spoon.

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—Alan Brown, founder and chair, DNA

Project 47 was conceptualized from a 2021 4A's diversity survey that found .017% of advertising talent self-identified as LGBTQ+, which would amount to 46 people across the industry. Studying the obvious discrepancy between a growing population at large

and a workforce wary of connecting to it, Brown



wanted to facilitate more comfort in the workplace

Emmy

Graham Nolan is the co-chair of storytelling and partnerships of Do The WeRQ, a platform spotlighting queer creativity in advertising. While it is now widely understood that LGBTQ+ people should be behind the content that specifically represents them, he said industry professionals and consumers still undervalue the community's widespread impact on art, comedy and culture.

Only about half of non-LGBTQ+ respondents believe that LGBTQ+ people working in advertising can make good contributions to non-LGBTQ+ content, according to a 2021 study from Do The Werq and customer experience platform Disqo. Nolan's response to these findings was, "What the hell do you think we've been doing all our lives?"

He pointed to the hit Saturday Night Live skit Wells For Boys, a Fisher-Price commercial spoof by LGBTQ+ writer Julio Torres, in which a young boy stares longingly into a toy wishing well for hours while contemplating his reflection instead of joining the other kids to play catch.

Wells For Boys - SNL



"It wasn't a gay thing necessarily, but wow, that idea would have never happened without gay perspective," he said, pointing to creativity as a byproduct of existing in a heteronormative world. "There's a tendency that a straight writer would have just reinforced what we already believe about toys."

Restructuring responsibility

76% of workers report that their organization does not offer an LGBTQ+ employee resource (ERG) or support group, according to a 2023 survey from career platform Monster.com. For organizations that do offer those resources, advocates point to

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the dangers of only asking those within the

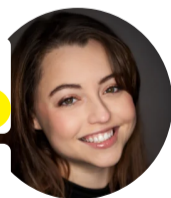
Kaig Lightner, the founder of a nonprofit youth soccer club who identifies as queer and trans, fills his spare time by providing training in LGBTQ+ inclusion with a focus on gender identity. Lightner, who has worked with brands including Adidas and Shipt, said it's easy for clients to ignore these issues when they don't feel personally connected to them.

"The biggest gap I'm trying to close up is this myth that there's such a big difference between the transgender and cisgender experience," said Lightner, who stresses that regardless of their alignment with the binary, everyone has faced "some sort of gender exploration. "If we close that gap and have understanding across communities, that is where progress is going to happen."

Refusing to discount the basics, he said the first step is moving people away from the gendered and heteronormative language that stops LGBTQ+ employees from coming out.

For Fishman, who still pauses before pivoting conversations away from "And what does your husband do?", a simple family photo on her desk was once her quiet way of signalling her identity to colleagues. But she's since found a greater level of comfort and acceptance in the workplace.

"When something uncomfortable has happened over the years, I've had colleagues speak up on my behalf," Fishman said. "I didn't even have the chance to fumble my way through because they stepped in and did it for me. I've had a lot of appreciation for that along the way."



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