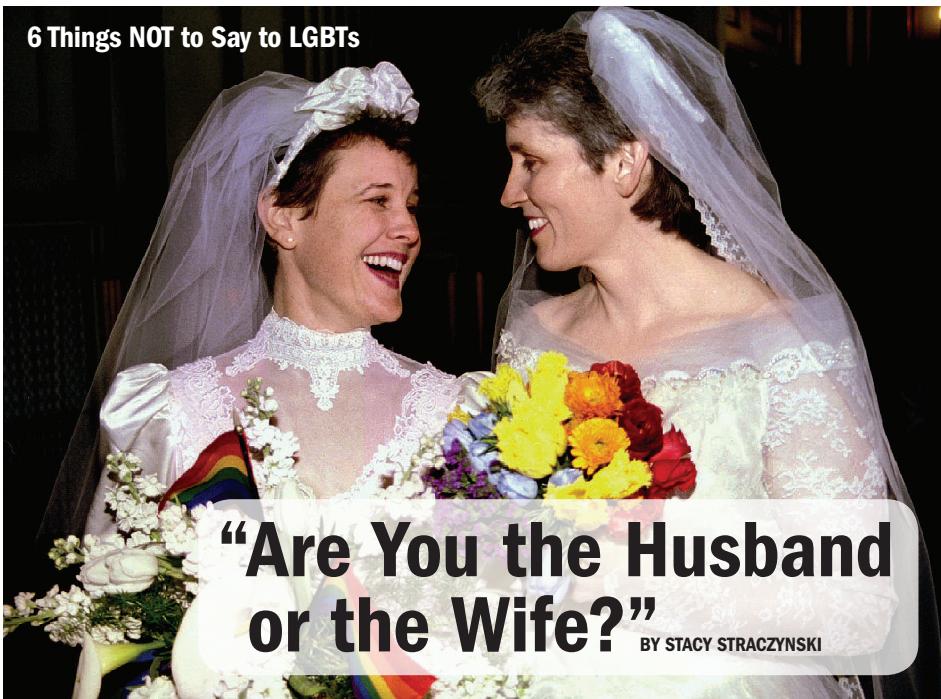


6 Things NOT to Say to LGBTs



“Are You the Husband or the Wife?”

BY STACY STRACZYNSKI

The growing acceptance of same-gender marriage and diversity in sexual orientation in recent years has shifted mindsets and removed a lot of blatant discrimination toward LGBTs from workplaces, says Jean-Marie Navetta, Director of Equality & Diversity Partnerships at PFLAG National, a nonprofit grassroots organization that promotes the health and well-being of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons and offers support for parents, families, friends and allies. But Navetta notes that LGBT employees still face comments and questions that subtly allow stereotypes to persist.

“These can be both more common and more hurtful. For example, it’s easy to label someone as horrible (and unprofessional) for asking about your sex life, but the line is blurrier when the question isn’t overt,” says Navetta.

When faced with an off-color comment or an inappropriate question, it’s important to remember that people do not necessarily mean to offend. Doug Case, Business/Marketing Segment manager for Wells Fargo’s Community Bank in San Francisco, suggests it’s best to address the lack of cultural competence. “We expect colleagues to have inclusive language, but we need to hold ourselves accountable to inviting that

dialogue,” says Case, who serves as an Executive Sponsor for Wells Fargo’s PRIDE Team Member Network.

Remember that everyone has their own biases and internal barriers they need to work through. “Don’t write people off,” advises Navetta. “Becoming inclusive—especially about something that is new to someone—isn’t an overnight transformation. It is a journey, and we need to be the ones who show them how.”

Things NOT to Say to LGBT Employees

1 “Wow, I never would have guessed that you’re [gay, lesbian, bi or transgender]!”

While this comment might be meant as a compliment—acknowledging that a person does not fall into the traditional, sometimes negative stereotype—it can still cause offense. Don’t believe the sitcoms: “Not all gay guys love Madonna,” says Michael Moran, Interactive Art Director, DiversityInc. And not all lesbians watch sports. Addressing commonplace assumptions like these is a good first step toward creating inclusion.

2 “Is one of you the husband and one the wife? I don’t get it.” Why do relationships have to be about traditional roles? In

any marriage or relationship, it’s about partnership and sharing responsibilities. Reframing the conversation this way can help open mindsets about same-gender partnerships and marriage.

3 To a transgender person: “What’s your real name? What did you used to look like?”

Transgender issues are still a very new topic to many people, says Navetta, which creates an organic curiosity among some. But asking about someone’s past life is an absolute no-no. “People should be seen as who they are today, in the affirmed gender in which they live,” she says.

4 “Your lifestyle is your business. We don’t need to talk about it here.”

Referring to sexual orientation and gender identity as a “lifestyle” or “sexual preference” suggests that being LGBT, and ultimately identifying as such, is a choice. Being able to talk about your partner at work, putting family photos in your cubicle, bringing your partner to the office holiday party—these are simple things that allow ALL employees to bring their whole selves to work and fully engage.

5 “It’s too bad you’re gay.” “Yeah, too bad for you. I get this from flirtatious women after the truth dawns,” says Moran. While it’s meant as a harmless flirtation or joke, this can imply that there is something wrong with being gay. Why else would you call it “bad”?

6 “I have a friend who’s [gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender] that you should meet.”

Just because two people share or have similar sexual orientations does not mean that a friendship or other relationship will automatically blossom. Every person has their own personality, interests and hobbies, but being gay isn’t one of them.

More Things Not to Say

- You’re gay? That’s great. I love gay people.
- Do you watch Glee?
- What should I [wear, do with my hair]?
- Do you know if [insert name] is gay, too?
- Does that mean you don’t want kids?
- Wait, you’re not attracted to me ... right?