



AMARI VICTORIA'S COMING OUT AT WORK STORY

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Abstract

This document describes the author's own experience in coming out at work. It is a story about this journey and may provide some insight into how coming out at work might occur. Your journey may be different.

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Prologue

Let me begin with a little history of this document. I began my coming out process ('journey') in early April of 2018. I had come out to my wife in the summer of 2017, but until April, I had not come out to anyone else. Because of my wife's close relationship with her brother and her desire to talk to him about her spouse being transgender, I came out to him before I started my journey in earnest.

Quite a bit of research and thought had gone into how I would come out when that time came. Ultimately, I created a coming out plan. The plan consisted of three main parts: 1) come out to my family members and best friends, 2) come out to all my other friends, and 3) come out at work.

This document describes my coming out at work journey.

Sometime after I had completed my journey, I was asked by the facilitator of a transgender support group meeting that I attend, to give a presentation about my coming out at work experience. The following document is my presentation to the group (with a few edits). Enjoy!

Like just about everything so far in my journey as a transgender woman, coming out at work was necessary (for me) and inevitable.

During all stages of my coming out, one thing that was a constant was that I had the need to be in control of the information flow, such that in my mind, the only people who knew I was a transgender woman were those I had explicitly told. I certainly asked the people that I came out to, to keep the information to themselves until I had come out to 'everyone' (basically I asked them to wait for me to tell them it was ok to talk to others about me). A bit naive perhaps, but maybe I was successful in this endeavor. This desire to 'control' the information flow carried right through my coming out plan for work.

I realized as I was coming out to my family, then friends, that at some point in time, I would have to come out at work; I just didn't really know when that point in time might occur. Once I started my coming out process, I literally could not stop. No matter the trepidation, stress or worry I experienced prior to the next coming out conversation, every 'successful' coming out experience pushed me to continue. All my coming out conversations were 'successful', to varying degrees, but I experienced little to no negative feedback. However, a couple of my previously closest friends no longer accepted me and have ended communications with me. The elation I experienced at every coming out conversation with my family and friends just compelled me to continue. Coming out was necessary.

However, when I was satisfied that I had come out to all of the family members and friends that I deemed necessary to come out to, I think the dread of having to come out at work caused me to hesitate. That hesitation in coming out however, spawned an entirely new goal. And that was to execute my name and gender marker change. At this point, I had been comfortable using my chosen, not-yet-official name, Amari Victoria, and my proper pronouns, she, her and hers, for about six months (with those to whom I had already come out).

My name and gender marker change process is, of course, another story, and I had only one small mishap. This caused a short delay, but the changes were otherwise completed without issue on July 30th, 2018.

So now that my name and gender marker were legally changed, my focus returned to that ominous task of coming out at work, at a steel mill. And not in an office setting, but on the manufacturing floor. Where the manly men (and women) lived and worked, breathed in the dirt and smoke, braving the molten steel, come summers' stifling heat or winters' knife-like cold. Toxic masculinity evident in every word, every action, the constant battle of (wo)man over metal, (wo)man over machine, (wo)man against (wo)man to outdo one another. And this, at a plant with not just a few-hundred, but rather nearly 5000 workers.

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And soon, to out myself in this place, where I met no other person in my 17 years there who was LGBTQ, and out.

But I had changed my name and gender marker, my social security card, and my birth certificate, and my driver's license showed it, while my employer was still referring to me by my old name and gender, paying me as if I were still that person, taking my taxes for the government - a government that now knew me with a different name and gender. Coming out was inevitable.

This part of my coming out plan, needed a plan.

This new plan consisted of four steps:

STEP #1

- Contact Human Resources to begin the process of updating my personal information.
- Come out to the HR representative and discuss how the next steps in the plan would occur.

STEP #2

- Come out to my department management, i.e. my direct manager and his manager, and then to all the other managers in my department

STEP #3

- Come out to my peers, all the other engineers and technicians in my department

STEP #4

- Come out to the people in the area of the plant where I had been assigned to work (my own department was a service department, so most engineers and technicians did not work at the department's central location)

It was with the greatest apprehension that I put my plan into motion.

For step #1, I made an appointment with the HR representative for my department and let them know that I needed to fill out the Employee Change of Information form. My actual coming out to them was something I would accomplish when we met.

The appointment certainly went quite smoothly concerning the change of information; it was of course, just filling out a form. However, to change my name involved providing proper documentation, which I now possessed. At that point, my coming out at work plan was in motion. My HR representative was most professional and was able to take care of all the employee information changes, but had by their own admission, never encountered a transgender person coming out at my workplace's facility. They were unfamiliar with this process. This would require consultation with their peers and superiors, which they did after our appointment.

Finding out that they were unfamiliar with the process of someone coming out at work actually made me think, "Am I the first LGBTQ+ person to come out here?".

My HR representative did talk about what the plan moving forward *might* be, however, that was something they did not know. I suggested a few ideas which might be the makings of that plan.

After I took that first step of my plan, coming out to HR, and starting the process of updating my information at work, I decided that without HR really having a plan (at least known to me), that I had better take the lead as best I could (still trying to keep things in my control, though HR had a different idea).

I wrote a two page document outlining what I felt I might need to relay to the people I would be coming out to next (my department's management), and what I expected from them (not how I expected them to react, but rather how I expected to be treated by them once I had come out).

Some of the items in this document were:

1. That the company's anti-harassment and anti-discrimination policies (which included sexual orientation and gender identity) would protect me and would be enforced.
2. That I would be able to feel safe, and to be kept safe.
3. That I would be able to dress and act in a way that matched my gender identity (dressing in a way that matched my gender identity triggered some objection from my department's management, citing the environment of a steel mill dictated the manner of dress).
4. That my department's management would support me and be a front-line resource for their direct reports (where I was concerned), as well as become educated enough to answer questions, and defend me in hostile situations.
5. That I would be addressed by my legal name and referred to with the proper pronouns (she/her/hers), and that misgendering me, or refusing to use my legal name could be interpreted as harassment. Occasional missteps would be forgiven, but when done maliciously they would not.
6. That additional diversity and inclusion education and training by the company would be offered and available to those who wanted or needed it.
7. That as a transgender person, I would not merely be 'accommodated' but treated as a person with the gender which I identified (woman). An example would be my ability to use the bathroom assigned the gender with which I identify, or a bathroom designated as 'gender-neutral'. A 'transgender only' bathroom would not be acceptable. (All of the transgender women that I know can relate to this expectation, and the typically poor handling of the 'bathroom' issue.)

Additionally, I had some desires associated with my coming out at work. These were:

1. That coming out at work, and all that meant for my workplace, would not negatively impact my situation at work.
2. That my work relationships and environment would not change. Obviously, my work relationships were going to change some – I had been seen as a 'man', but going forward, seen as a 'woman'. What I mean here is that continued work with my peers would not be affected adversely. (However, that did not mean that I would accept working in a toxic or hostile environment.)
3. That I would be treated socially no differently than I was prior to coming out.
4. That I would always be treated with dignity, respect, and fairness.

Back to my story.

Between execution of steps #1 and #2 of my plan, I discovered in a conversation with the HR representative that all upper management, i.e. everyone above my department manager, had been informed about me. This was something I did not expect, nor did I know at first how I felt about that (loss of control). I also found out that the HR department had reached out to the company's Legal Department to obtain what was essentially transgender awareness and sensitivity training, modeled after the company's Dignity & Respect (human rights protections) policies. Everyone in the HR department and upper management had apparently been required to view the training.

Step #2 - the first meeting - coming out to my manager and their manager, went 'well'. That is, the company's Dignity & Respect policies seemed obvious in the acceptance and support I received, and to be fair, perhaps they really were quite understanding, as both were of ethnicities which have been subjected to discrimination or bias. This meeting was the first in which I personally viewed the Transgender Dignity & Respect training. There were some parts of it with which I was uncomfortable, but later, in retrospect, realized it really was sufficient for people who had never encountered a transgender person. This process was repeated when I came out to the other managers in my department. I felt that this was a necessary step, as these managers would have to answer any questions that were posed by their charges. Unfortunately, not all managers were able to attend the meeting, however, once again, the acceptance and support I received from those who were able to attend was positive (and surprising).

Steps #3 and #4 of the plan did not occur for another two and a half weeks, an agonizingly long period of time. I had begun this process, and with only some of the people 'in the know', I was eager to complete the process. Of course, there had been a great deal of anxiety associated with my coming out process, and I rightfully

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expected there to be quite a bit more. I would be coming out to my peers - engineers and technicians - people I had worked with for many years.

I initially thought that steps #3 and #4 of my plan would be separate, but HR and management decided that it would all happen in a single day. Imagine my anxiety coming out to nearly 100 people, in five one-hour meetings, all in the same day.

The first four meetings were one hour-long morning meetings, each manager's group, one at a time and one right after another. Four different presentations, led by my department manager, each a little different, each seeming to share a tidbit from the previous session, and always ending with me telling my story. Most sessions sat relatively comfortably with me, that is, it actually felt like I still had some semblance of control of the process, and I was allowed to tell my story, very likely to some people who didn't know what 'transgender' really meant. Each successive group that I came out to consisted of co-workers whom I had spent less time getting to know (based on their assigned work areas), and subsequently I received less of a warm and fuzzy feeling, though never did I get any indication that there was no acceptance or support. My group was the most supportive, with many compliments and congratulations, the group in which I had worked prior, just as supportive, with the final two groups' reactions being 'lukewarm'. However, in my mind, four successes.

Then, the final step of the final step of my plan, coming out at the shop where I was assigned. People I worked with day-in and day-out, but no one with whom I had any history.

So, there I stood in the shop conference room, trying not to pee my panties, with my HR representative, my department manager, my manager, the manager of the shop, and about thirty of the shop employees (Management, Production, Maintenance, Operations, Operations Technology and Quality folks). I viewed the Transgender Dignity & Respect training for the final time, listened to my department's management and the shop's management speak, and told my story one last time. With that, I relinquished control of information concerning me being transgender, and my coming out at work journey was complete!

Epilogue

I made an effort to not call out the name of my previous employer (as I do not work for them any longer), and also to avoid gendering any of the people involved in my coming out experience. However, depending upon who may read my coming out at work journey, my former employer may be revealed. If you work or worked for this company, and are part of the LGBTQ+ community, I say to you, I see you. I did not necessarily know you when I was employed there, but I hope that you may someday decide that you too, are compelled to come out at work. I wish for you full acceptance and support.

I will be here for you, if you would like to talk or write me about my experience, or yours. I can be contacted at 219-895-6688 by phone and amari@lgbtq-nwi.org via email.

Thank you for reading my coming out at work story.

Amari