

OUT & EQUAL
WORKPLACE ADVOCATES

**YOUR STORY.
YOUR TRUTH.
YOUR POWER.**



This is **not a coming out guide.**

This is a tool to support reflection on how you share your story at work.

It's about self-empowerment.

*It's about **refining your self-awareness and skills.***

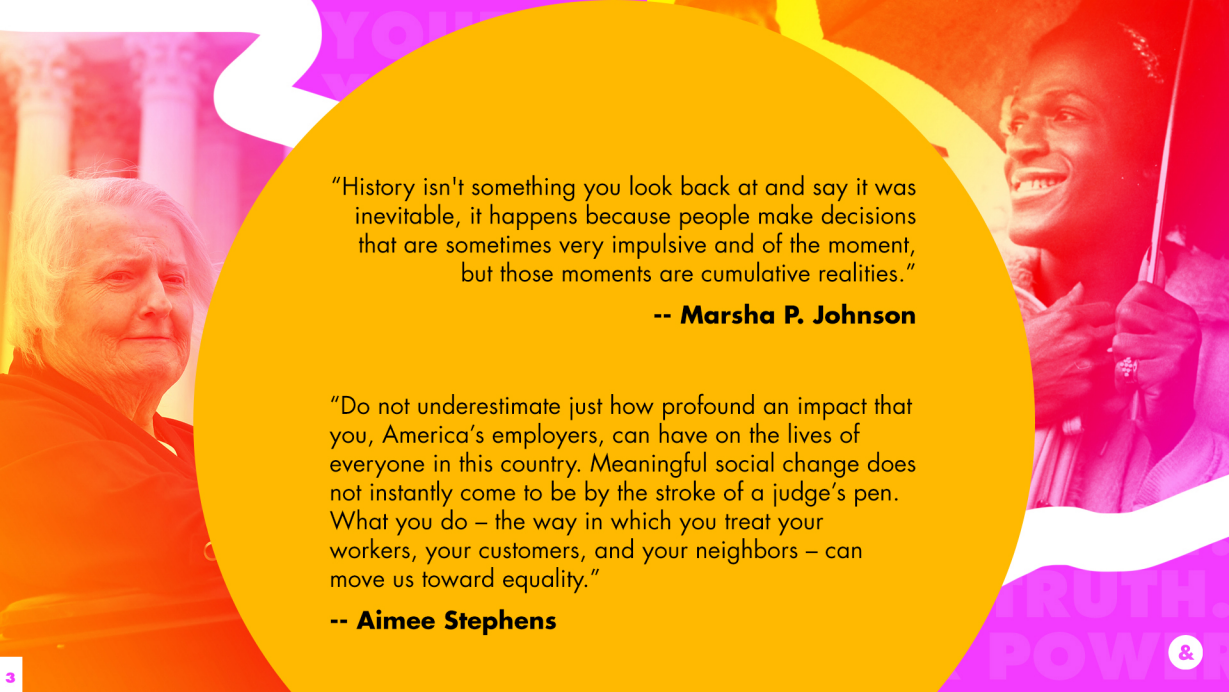
It's about understanding the science behind storytelling as a tool for change.

*It's about **strategically tapping into your own experiences as an LGBTQ person or ally to transform organizations.***

*It's about **you.***

**Your Story.
Your Truth.
Your Power.**

*It's time **to unlock it.***



"History isn't something you look back at and say it was inevitable, it happens because people make decisions that are sometimes very impulsive and of the moment, but those moments are cumulative realities."

-- **Marsha P. Johnson**

"Do not underestimate just how profound an impact that you, America's employers, can have on the lives of everyone in this country. Meaningful social change does not instantly come to be by the stroke of a judge's pen. What you do – the way in which you treat your workers, your customers, and your neighbors – can move us toward equality."

-- **Aimee Stephens**

Behind history-making headlines that continue to shape the LGBTQ movement, there is one fundamental act. From Marsha P. Johnson, one of the leaders of the Stonewall uprising to Aimee Stephens, who was behind the landmark 2020 Supreme Court case, *R.G. & G.R. Harris Funeral Homes Inc. v. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission & Aimee Stephens*, LGBTQ equality is propelled when someone seizes a moment and interrupts injustice by declaring who they are.

When we lay claims to equality and inclusion, we must reveal our truths, and in doing so we leverage our individual and collective power. The power of every LGBTQ individual to share their story is at the heart of the sweeping change we are seeing across communities and workplaces alike.

These “cumulative realities” are borne out in data demonstrating the dramatic rise in how many people personally know someone is lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. In the summer of 2021, the Pew Research Center reported that

42% of Americans personally know someone who is transgender and about one in four Americans (26%) personally know someone who uses gender neutral pronouns such as “they/them”¹.

It is fair to conclude that these revelations shared with colleagues, family, friends, and others, were not all planned “coming out” talks. LGBTQ people are often faced with daily decisions about sharing their truth.

Every fumbled pronoun directed at a nonbinary person, every assumption of a different-gender partner or spouse, requires an LGBTQ person to decide in a split second,

“Is this my moment to share my truth?”

The very construct of the “coming out” narrative may leave people thinking that telling your story as an LGBTQ person is a grand –likely one-time –life event. That construct simply does not capture the everyday realities of navigating a world that still mostly defaults to assumptions of cisgender, heterosexual, binary identities.

¹Minkin, Rachel, and Anna Brown. “Rising Shares of U.S. Adults Know Someone Who Is Transgender or Goes by Gender-Neutral Pronouns.” Pew Research Center, Pew Research Center, 27 July 2021, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/07/27/rising-shares-of-u-s-adults-know-someone-who-is-transgender-or-goes-by-gender-neutral-pronouns/.



Within the workplace, many LGBTQ people have had to translate these momentary decisions to be authentic into cumulative realities for the greater good. Through engagement in their Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) and dialogue with colleagues, many LGBTQ and ally individuals often supplant these moments in time with more thoughtful efforts to tell their fuller stories.

Storytelling as an inclusion tool is particularly powerful in the workplace. Nearly every change – from the first ERG, to trans-inclusive healthcare benefits, to companies' first public policy weigh-in, began because someone shared their story. And it's not just about hearts and minds, there is science and strategy behind the impact of our stories.

This guide is a tool for LGBTQ people and allies looking to strengthen their understanding of how to share their stories at work, reflect on the challenges and opportunities in doing so, and land in a place of empowerment and growth for the organization.

Sharing our stories and our truths is at the heart of how the LGBTQ community makes reticent colleagues friends, these friends become allies, and this collective compels employers as a whole to examine their own practices and footprint in the community through the lens of how they affect LGBTQ people. No longer in the abstract, LGBTQ equality and inclusion becomes core to the business or organization's own goals.

The most potent remedy against bias and misunderstanding is the simplest – and often the hardest to accomplish on a wide scale – increasing the number of people who personally know someone from that group. But we can, one-by-one, accomplish this march forward for LGBTQ inclusion and belonging.

WHY DO OUR STORIES MATTER?

Impactful stories enable us to learn about others in more powerful ways than simply hearing or reading factual information. In fact, **we are 22 times more likely to remember information² when it is told to us in the format of an engaging story.** Why? One simple reason is because they act as mnemonic devices for facts by organizing abstract material into a meaningful structure. They also trigger our emotions, which leaves a more lasting impression. Companies know this better than anyone – their marketing and advertising teams often aim to tell a compelling, funny or inspirational story in their ads in order to create a memorable and persuasive message. And it works!

THIS! ↙
Stories quite literally change the way that our brain processes information. Research shows that **cognitive processes change when we become so lost in a narrative that we hardly notice the world around us — and it's called "transportation"**³. In this state, we view the protagonist more favorably and we are more likely to believe the story. When we are presented with stand-alone facts, we think back and critically compare to our own existing knowledge and opinions. However, when listening to a personal narrative, our single focus is on the story. And when that story touches our emotions and inspires us, or when we are "transported", we are much less likely to pause to deconstruct or doubt, and we instead are compelled to believe and embrace the narrative.

²Harrison, Kate. "A Good Presentation Is about Data and Story." *Forbes Magazine*, 15 Apr. 2016, www.forbes.com/sites/kateharrison/2015/01/20/a-good-presentation-is-about-data-and-story/?sh=271def3f450f.

³Zandan, Noah. "Does Telling Stories Really Make You 22 Times More Memorable?" *Quantified Communications*. www.quantified.ai/blog/storytelling-22-times-more-memorable.

HOW DO OUR STORIES SHOW UP IN THE WORK-PLACE?

There are several reasons why we would tell our stories at work. Here are some common situations in which we might feel driven to share our narratives:

Moments of Connection and Empathy

There are times when we share stories to respond to a moment of connection or to extend support. **Kelsey**, a queer Executive and Pride Sponsor, is assigned **Clara**, a Junior Accountant as a mentee through the company's mentorship program. Kelsey observes that Clara is hesitant and nervous in her interactions, rarely sharing much and not benefitting from the program. Kelsey, isn't sure what accounts for the reticence and decides to try a tactic known as strategic vulnerability: Kelsey opens up to Clara about how she was fired from her first job after coming out. She describes the fear and shame she still has deep down, and how she landed at the current company, found allies, became comfortable integrating her identity and her professional profile which accelerated her on the path to becoming an Executive. Clara is moved by this sharing and opens up about her anxiety with her coworkers accepting her as pansexual. They bond over these anxieties and share coping mechanisms. Clara finds motivation in seeing someone like herself in an Executive role and she gains the confidence to tell her own story at the next Workplace Summit. To her surprise, three colleagues reach out to her and she becomes a trusted confidante and mentor.

Alternatively, a co-worker, **Gesilda** may confide in a trusted friend at work about her child who recently came out as nonbinary. Even if Gesilda's friend is not a part of the LGBTQ community, she may not have any other safe space in her life to confide in someone and seek support. Workplaces that offer a culture of understanding and empathy allow Gesilda to find community and feel a sense of belonging at work.



HOW DO OUR STORIES SHOW UP IN THE WORK- PLACE?



Spontaneous or Reactive Calls to Action

There are many times in which we might be quickly called to share our stories in the wake of office chatter and gossip. For example, **Lakshmi** is in a meeting with some colleagues who start discussing recent state legislation banning trans youth from accessing medical care. The consensus among the group is that any parent who lets their children transition is a bad parent. Though unexpected, Lakshmi, a parent of a trans child herself, may be suddenly called to speak up and voice her perspective on the rights of trans youth which she hopes will have a very powerful and personal impact on the group.

There are many other instances of spontaneous calls to action. Sometimes, things just happen, and we are faced with the decision of whether or not to speak up. For example, a transgender man, **Miguel**, prints a ticket for an upcoming business trip and the ticket displays his deadname (his name given to him at birth that he no longer uses). His colleague **Sara** approaches the printer and realizes that two other employees have found the ticket and are exchanging a few offensive jokes about Miguel's deadname. At that moment, Sara is suddenly confronted with a scenario in which she can speak up to tell her own story of allyship to the trans community and provide a moment of education for her colleagues.

HOW DO OUR STORIES SHOW UP IN THE WORK- PLACE?

Out of Necessity

There are also cases in which we might be required to come out and share things with our coworkers that perhaps we did not feel the need to do previously. It is often likely that these situations are prompted by stressful circumstances, making them even more difficult. For example, **Ankit**, a bisexual man, was not out at work. However, he needed to come out in order to have discussions about his domestic partner, **Eric**, joining his medical insurance during a time where Eric was dealing with a serious illness. Previous to this, many colleagues had met Ankit's ex-partner, **Sheryl** (a cis woman), and had assumed he was straight. Some of these coworkers are now congratulating Ankit on "coming out as gay", leaving him to have to explain his bisexual identity.

Additionally, those who transition in the workplace must come out and discuss parts of their identity to have certain changes made to their internal and external files as well as day-to-day interactions with co-workers, clients, and others. Many companies have valuable procedures in place to make this often difficult and stressful process easier for transitioning employees, but in any case, they will need to share a part of their story by coming out to their colleagues.



HOW DO OUR STORIES SHOW UP IN THE WORK- PLACE?

Strategic Acts Toward Change

Finally, there are stories and narratives that we take the time to plan and flesh out to achieve workplace inclusion goals.

- An ERG Executive Champion might want to talk about her gay brother who passed away from HIV to advocate for greater corporate advocacy on LGBTQ+ issues.
- A nonbinary person may come out and talk about the importance of using their correct pronouns to persuade the rest of the ERG to prioritize a pronoun campaign as a top priority for the year.
- A CEO might tell the story of their trans child to take a stance against anti-trans sentiments and legislation.
- A gay man may want to share his story of becoming a father when advocating for more inclusive family leave policies.

There are many situations in which we choose to share (or not to share) our narratives at work. Each scenario shapes what we decide to share and how we frame it. Therefore, another important piece of best communicating your truth is to **assess your starting point.**



ASSESSING YOUR STARTING POINT

Out of the four previous situations, *“telling your story out of necessity”* and *“strategic acts toward change”* give us more time to assess our starting point. The more time we spend contemplating what our various starting points are in different scenarios, the better prepared we are for a more spontaneous moment of sharing.

Some things to consider are:

Am I safe to share my story in this moment?

Who am I in this setting – an executive, a manager, a friend, a colleague?

What do people know about me to date?

AM I SAFE TO SHARE MY STORY IN THIS MOMENT?

Does my employer protect me from discrimination?

What is the power dynamic in the room?
Are there allies present?

Am I only comfortable enough to share part, but not all, of my story?

How are my other identities in play in this situation, and how might they adversely affect my safety and/or comfort level?

It may not be safe to share your story in all scenarios, and there is never any pressure to do so. The practical reality is that intersecting and cultural identities such as race, class and more hover over every decision and consequence of telling your story. The first point of assessment should be whether or not it is a safe space to share your truth in that moment, taking into account your physical safety, emotional and mental wellbeing, and job security.



WHO AM I IN THIS SETTING – AN EXECUTIVE, A MANAGER, A FRIEND, A COLLEAGUE?

- Who is in my sphere of influence?
- Does messaging or framing change depending on who I am talking to?

The way we share stories is different on a coffee break with a close colleague versus in a board room giving a presentation on behalf of the LGBTQ ERG. The coffee break conversation may allow for more openness, casual conversational framing, and vulnerability than the board room. The purpose in this scenario might be extending empathy for a colleague or offering a moment of education to a friend. The board room conversation in front of a group of executives, while also a sincere narrative, will also focus on making strategic direct ties to business values to drive deeper-level inclusion initiatives.



WHAT DO PEOPLE KNOW ABOUT ME TO DATE?

- **Consider audience's starting point – where should I meet them?**
- **Do I need to lay any foundations first?**

Ensuring everyone in the conversation is on the same page is an important starting point and will reduce the likelihood that someone tunes you out or becomes defensive, simply because they do not understand the basics of LGBTQ issues. It might be strategic to first lay down some definitions and foundational building blocks before diving into a narrative.



CHARTING YOUR STRATEGY

Once you have evaluated your starting point, it is time to plot out your strategy on how to frame the content, tone, and delivery of your message. A well-constructed narrative that is context-appropriate will be most likely to have a lasting impact on the audience to change hearts and minds.

A story looks different depending on the overall goal of the message. Think about what you want the final outcome to be and shape the context accordingly. For instance, if you have the specific goal of advocating for more inclusive healthcare, you may choose to focus your story specifically around the struggles you've had in adding your domestic partner to your policy, and the emotional and financial impact it has had on your family. You may also choose to tell a success story that focuses on a potential solution to the problem at hand.

WHAT IS THE GOAL OR VALUE OF SHARING?

What point am I trying to get across?

What do I want the outcome to be?

YOUR STORY. YOUR TRUTH. YOUR

CHARTING YOUR STRATEGY

WHAT PIECES OF INFORMATION ARE CRITICAL TO THE STORY?

What details are relevant, and what details will distract from the main point?

Is there any piece of your narrative that may make someone uncomfortable or reveal something about them that they choose to keep private?

You are in charge of your own story, and you are accountable for the information it may reveal about others. Things such as context, overall goals, comfort level and safety all factor into what you disclose. No matter what you choose to share and what you choose to leave out, be sure to acknowledge the vast diversity among the community and that one person's story is not everyone's story.

IN THE CASE OF SHARING YOUR STORY AS A STRATEGIC ACT TOWARDS CHANGE, WHO SHOULD MY AUDIENCE BE?

Should you run your story by trusted friends and colleagues first?

Who should hear your story? Your ERG? An executive champion? Your Government Affairs team? Your DEI or HR departments? The audience of a panel discussion?

The overall goal dictates who your audience should be. For example, if you are speaking out in order to get your company to take a public stance on a public policy, consider speaking to your ERG and/or Executive Champion to organize a conversation with the Government Affairs department. If you want to celebrate Pride by sharing your perspective, talk to your ERG or DEI folks about whether there are any internal or external panel discussions that you can participate in.

TIPS FOR REFINING AND ADJUSTING YOUR NARRATIVE

Once you have considered all of the steps above, there are always ways to continue to fine-tune our stories and make sure we can adapt to various contexts and still achieve the greatest impact.



Keep the story short and to the point, without too many details that distract from your overall message.



Keep it real and stay true to who you are. As long as it is safe to do so, showing true authenticity and vulnerability is what opens the door for human connection and empathy.



Consider getting the listeners involved and putting them in your shoes by telling stories that have at least a few relatable points, or by asking them to think critically and envision how they would feel in your situation.



Pay attention to your tone, pace, volume, and non-verbal cues. To get better at this, consider practicing in the mirror or recording yourself delivering your speech. You can also run it by a trusted friend or colleague who can provide helpful feedback.



Be especially mindful of any assumptions in your story about identities, religions, or cultures that are not your own.



Think back to some of the most moving stories you have heard. What made you feel drawn in and connected to the speaker? Try to find opportunities to use similar approaches in your narrative.



Our stories reflect our unique realities and are our greatest tools in building true empathy and driving change in the workplace. By utilizing the information and strategies included in this guide, employers, individual leaders, and employees are better positioned to begin or refine dialogues around LGBTQ inclusion in the workplace to advocate for structural or policy changes and foster cultures of belonging.

Please stay in touch with us at hello@outandequal.org to share your application of these practices and any feedback you have on this resource and/or your employer's experience. Thank you for working to ensure no one has to choose between being out *and* equal.

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