

Mentoring a Globally Diverse Workforce – Celebrating Pride Month

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Note: The following Q & A reflects the individual experiences and opinions of the Pride Month Mentoring Panel panelists. References to appropriate DoD and Air Force regulations are included where applicable.

Q&A

- Have you encountered unique mentoring needs for LGBTQ+ members/employees? What strategies have you found to be effective for these circumstances?
 - In mentoring LGBTQ+ servicemembers, awareness of ongoing legislation is much more relevant, so an awareness of current events will matter. But in general, within the boundaries of our service, we have the same issues as every other service member.
- Can you describe your experience of being out in the workplace? Has your LGBTQ+/ally status created roadblocks or opportunities in your career progression or in mentoring relationships?
 - I have been denied job opportunities, awards, etc. before sexual orientation became a protected category in 2015, 4 years after the repeal of DADT. But, the experience has been largely supportive.
- The LGBTQ+ community is not monolithic. What would you recommend to people trying to learn more about leading people from different parts of the LGBTQ+ spectrum?
 - In the same way no one can know everything about African American culture, Asian and Pacific Islander culture, Native American culture, etc. accept the fact that we don't know everything about LGBTQ+ culture and learn. That discussion, where you learn who your mentee is and their culture, builds a great foundation for your relationship with them.
- How do you have a productive conversation with your supervisor when they may not seem approachable?
 - Frame the conversation the same way you do when you tell your friends if you're venting or actually need help. Tell them if you need feedback, support, mentorship, etc. And, if you're still anxious, you can document it on a memo or even bring a friend.

- How has representation, or the lack thereof, in leadership shaped how you view your own position in the service?
 - It's essential and luckily the LGBTQ+ community had representation at most ranks and career fields shortly after the repeal of Don's Ask, Don't Tell, a significant step up on other minorities. However, it's important to learn about those who served before, during, and after to recognize what service could look like if we go back and forth on DOD policies.
- What types of avenues should mentors know about if their mentee is facing discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity?
 - First, Service Before Self comes into play. Since 2015, sexual orientation has been a protected category for service members and the same since 1980 for civilians. In 2021, the DOD added gender identity, expression, or sex characteristics. So regardless of personal opinions, there's DOD policy that must be followed.
 - If someone has experienced a harm or condition of employment, such as being passed up for a promotion, due to their sexual orientation or gender identity, that could be a case of discrimination that should be reported to the EO office. However, if someone is experiencing microaggressions or bullying, they can seek help via their DEIA office's anti-harassment program.
- Can you describe a memorable occasion when a coworker was supportive/"got it right" and the impact it had on you?
 - My best friend, a fellow Captain at the time, helped me plan and sat with me as I came out to my family. My story is a lucky one as my family was accepting, but for those service members whose families aren't their coworkers and service members may become their surrogate family so recognize that support and safe environment may be more important than you think for those service members.

Chat Questions: 0 asked, 4 answers tied into other questions, many sparked discussions in the chat

- How does the USAF ensure that the celebration of a pride month event does not at the same time step on another person's free exercise religion who might disagree with aspects of what is being celebrated under pride month? Are there protections in place for an employee who might choose to abstain from participating in a pride month event? What protections are in place to

ensure that there is no retaliation against employees who choose to abstain from participating in these events?

- The good thing about this question is it's asking for the same protections that the LGBTQ+ community is asking for in regards to the Bill of Rights. We can work arm-in-arm to make sure all our rights are protected as we all want to be able to live our authentic identities. The balance point for those in military service or as federal employees is that those expressions of identity cannot impede on the rights of any other individual, all persons have the right to serve safely and effectively. So, in the same way that no one can be mandated to attend a Pride event, no one can be blocked from it either.
- Is there any USAF policy on how pronouns should be used or not used in a diverse workplace?
 - AFI 33-337, The Tongue and Quill, tells you about how to use pronouns in communication (written, email, briefings, etc). AFPD 36-27 specifically protects civilian Airmen from harassment based on gender identity. The Airmen's Creed talks about never leaving an Airman behind and failing to use an Airmen's proper pronouns does exactly that, sets them back in their personal journey of growth. While not dictated by policy, a good tip to ensure you are using someone's proper pronouns is introducing yourself with your pronouns and giving the other person the space and safety to respond with their pronouns. Also, putting your pronouns in your email signature is a good way to show you are a safe space for someone to be themselves.
 - DOD encourages gender neutral terminology whenever possible. You can find some tips on how to include gender neutral language in your writing in the [DOD Writing Guide](#).
- What type of training does the Air Force offer for civilian supervisors to help them manage diverse teams?
 - Unconscious Bias training is a great start. Then, what's most important for you to build your team, is to talk to your Airmen and learn who they are from them. Know what drives them, limits them, and how to lead them. The DEIA office has training on Psychological Safety geared toward teaching supervisors and teams how to create an environment free from fear of ridicule so that all perspectives can be heard. There is also training on Emotional Intelligence designed to teach individuals how to recognize and manage their own emotions as well as the emotions of the people around them. The DEIA office

also has many computer based trainings and short videos in their library on AF E-Learning:

<https://usaf.percipio.com/customlibrary/f0598f64-1868-440c-b4c7-96a935742b55/f5f05131-2cdb-499b-8a6d-1550c9a79b08>

- Is there a dictionary that explains all of the diverse terms?
 - There's a number of available dictionaries from reputable sources like the Gender Unicorn, Human Rights Campaign, PFLAG, It Gets Better, and more. But labels will always be generic and convoluted with stereotypes. Not every gay man is the same even though we all identify as gay. In the end, conversations where you learn about an individual is building a stronger foundation for that relationship with them, so learn about that person and how they identify and define it. Being an ally for the LGBTQ+ community is not always about understanding every identity, but understanding that everyone's identity is their own and unique to them.
- Can we touch on "realizing" vs. "acknowledging" a gender alignment or sexuality change? Many I know prefer to say they came out vs. implying a change, because it implies being able to switch back, voluntarily or otherwise.
 - To give an analogy, when did you realize you wanted to be in the Air Force? A specific career field? A full career or just a few years? No individual knows, at birth, what they're going to be through their whole life. We learn who we are over time. That applies from a biological standpoint as well as cognitive. Puberty has a great impact on our personal identities, and our frontal cortex doesn't finish developing until our 20s on average. Over this growth and development we learn who we are so it is a "realization" or "coming out." Some may know who they are earlier than others. Social stigmas and pressures do affect our outward expression of it, but it doesn't change who we are inside.
 - Specifically for transgender people, some realize at an extremely young age (as young as 2 or 3) that they are not the gender they were assigned at birth. For other people, it may take many years to have that realization. Still more people are aware something is wrong but cannot pinpoint what the issue is, just that they don't enjoy being a man or woman, that it feels wrong. Some of those folks that realize it will not immediately "come out" for various reasons. These can include fear of personal safety, fear of economic impact (losing parental financial support, losing a job, losing a supporting spouse for

example), or fear of a loss of their community and support network to name a few. This gives the impression to outsiders that it is a sudden change when that is almost never the case. By the time someone “comes out” even the first time they’ve likely been struggling with the issue for some time. There are transgender folks today who didn’t begin transition until they were receiving Medicare, because they didn’t realize that they could.

- Do you believe the government is further ahead of acceptance/accommodations than the civilian sector?
 - Both yes and no. The DOD is a large employer of transgender persons. However, the DOD has many traditions and concepts based in gender, expression, and identity that have nothing to do with readiness, lethality, or operational capabilities. We may be unintentionally limiting people from being their fullest selves for the sake of “how we’ve always done it,” and it is impacting recruiting and retention.
- Many states’ policies are changing to target people who are transgender. Can the federal government make policy around targeting suppressing transgender rights?
 - We serve at the pleasure of our elected officials, however no one in the DOD wants our policies to yo-yo, as that does have major operational impacts. After 12 years of open LGB service and 7 years of open Transgender service, it’s difficult to argue readiness has been decremented so many believe it’s unlikely to move backwards. There’s existing EEO protections in place for military members and federal employees that protects sexual orientation and gender identity. In states where laws or cultures may create existential threats, the Best Interest of the Air Force (BIOTAF) process allows you to PCS out of that state.
- Do DoD Employees have protections from the harmful anti LGBTQIA+ policies being implemented in certain states?
 - Yes, federal policy applies in the work place and to interactions between federal employees. However, there are very real existential threats to the LGBTQ+ community in large swaths of the country. Personnel should be vigilant towards their health and safety, leaders should know if local and state law might risk their personnel, and if situations devolve to take advantage of the BIOTAF program.
- What does sex have to do with work?

- Anyone's sex life shouldn't be a topic of conversation in the office. It should remain in private conversations with your medical care providers and loved ones. LGBTQ+ inclusion and visibility is about our ability to serve as our authentic selves with all the same rights and privileges as our heterosexual, cisgender coworkers. We want to talk about our spouses and bring them to events, have pictures of our families on our desks, be afforded opportunities for competitive selection and awards, and generally the privilege to serve without fear of reprisal, retaliation, or restriction because of our identity. I encourage everyone to look up the court case of SFC Perry Watkins whose case provided a legal precedent for the different definitions of sexual orientation as a status versus a conduct in 1988.
- What purpose does a pronoun identifier serve, especially for those with binary names?
 - It's a sign of support. When I see a "Chad Mann" who is still using gender identifiers in their signature block even though it's a stereotypically gender-binary name, it shows that Mr. Mann is signaling his support for individuals to disclose and use their pronouns. Even LGB folks who are not transgender are more likely to feel comfortable engaging with them on all topics as they've created a safe space for others to be their authentic selves.
 - Additionally, there may be folks who are in the process of transitioning but haven't yet decided on a name or changed it in DEERS so that it shows up on their email. There was a period of time where I had come out to my supervisor but had not decided on a new name, so she referred to me as she/her but I still had a stereotypically male first name. There are also many people without typical binary names or non-western names that may not lend themselves to one gender or another. Having pronouns in their signature block may help them avoid awkward conversations correcting someone when they are accidentally misgendered.
- What benefit or detriment do you believe is in effect with the public mostly seeing the most boisterous and attention seeking faces of the LGBTQ+ community?
 - The benefit is it's forcing a conversation, but the detriment is that it may not be a conversation that advances understanding. The same could be said about political figures that operate within the extreme minorities on both sides of the aisle, though. What's important is that representation matters. Those in leadership positions need to be

visible with their affinities. Otherwise, the perception will be that the extremes are the only cases and it's easier to take action restricting them due to their presentation. When we can see members of the LGBTQ+ communities as individuals, we can start to destigmatize the stereotypes.

- Why would a person desire to change genders versus choosing to follow the gay/lesbian lifestyle?
 - Orientation and identity are completely separate things and I recommend referencing the Gender Unicorn. Your orientation is about what you're attracted to in a potential partner. Your identity is about who you are inside regardless of outward expression. In the Venn diagram of these two concepts, the only overlap is that they're immutable, intrinsic characteristics of yourself.
- Is there a preferred or standardized format for including pronouns in email signature blocks? Where can I confirm / get more information about that?
 - Absolutely, AFI 33-337 is your reference here. There is also guidance within the Tongue and Quill.
- Shouldn't decisions be made based on facts of the work being done and not how someone feels about different things? What does sexual orientation and gender identity have to do with making things better? Shouldn't the focus be on the AF mission to support the Warfighter?
 - Absolutely! We should be focusing on the mission and picking the best individuals to achieve it based on their knowledge, skills, and abilities. By being more inclusive to the LGBTQ+ community and other minority groups, we can widen the pool of candidates that we consider for these jobs and ensure we truly are finding the most qualified individual. Unfortunately, there are still conscious and unconscious biases that may be setting up barriers for qualified individuals to enter military or civilian service and be fully engaged and productive once they get there. We should be moving together to eliminate biases and discriminatory policies so we can focus on the mission.
 - Regardless of how someone personally feels about the LGBTQIA+ community, polling shows that a large portion (around 19.7%) of Gen Z identifies themselves as somewhere within the LGBTQIA+ umbrella. If we as leaders and a fighting force want to be able to recruit, retain, and lead this large subset of our young people, we need them to feel safe at work, and we need to understand their struggles so that we can lead them effectively. We cannot afford to reject

otherwise qualified candidates from service on the basis of gender identity or sexual orientation if we are to succeed in a peer or near-peer conflict.

- How do we respond to the negative feedback from the workforce when we share information about LGBTQ+ community?
 - It's unlikely that we'll create any significant change with mass engagement and generic messages to the force. We can change policy that way, but individual behaviors and opinions take longer, more personal engagement. Research has shown that the best way to break a stereotype is through one-on-one conversation with someone from that stereotyped group. However, negative feedback that's creating a hostile work environment can be managed by your local EEO or DEIA office, and expectations of "being a good Wingman" are documented in published guidance (AFI 1-1) so there's a foundation for engagement there. On that foundation, visibility and representation are key to overcoming opinions and changing behaviors so leaders at all levels need to be visible.
 - Strong and visible support from leadership, especially Squadron CCs/SELs/Shirts, sets the tone that vocal intolerance will not be tolerated. This allows LGBTQIA+ members to show that we are here to accomplish the mission just like everyone else. Data shows that exposure to new groups is extremely effective in reducing or eliminating prejudice towards those groups, so leaders should do everything in their power to allow LGBTQ+ members and employees to safely serve, allowing us to accomplish both the mission as well break down prejudices.
- Why do we have a whole month for LGBTQ+ pride when our military members only get a few days? Shouldn't it be the other way around since the military members are the ones protecting this country?
 - It is important that we celebrate all of the communities that have contributed to ensuring our national security, which is why we celebrate so many special observances. While we have special days holidays such as Veterans' Day and Memorial Day, we also celebrate National Military Appreciation Month runs all of May in honor of our active duty and retired military members.
- What do you see as the finishing line as to when the threat against LGBTQ+ rights is defeated?
 - That's a really hard question to answer. Sociocultural norms change dramatically over time, just look at the gendering of pink and blue

over the centuries (pink used to be the color for men, not women). But a good marker for “success” is when debate amongst leaders about LGBTQ+ service ceases to be necessary or even exist; that we’re just part of the fabric of the all-volunteer force. Typically, the military moves intentionally slower than society so that is a significant milestone to pursue. Personal behaviors or beliefs, though, will be a much, much longer road to walk. There will always be more to learn about inclusion of all cultures, including the LGBTQ+ community, so there is not any real finish line.

- What programs exist, if any, through the AF or DoD to protect their trans civilian employees' medical needs?
- Protections for civilian employees is still a work in progress. If you are interested in learning more and creating positive change to ensure the safety of transgender civilian employees, please reach out to your local DEIA office on how you can join the LGBTQ+ Initiative Team.
- What is the right way to respond to those members that use religion as the reason they refuse to use someone's preferred pronouns?
 - EEO policy and published Air Force guidance affords protections from harassment and hostile work environments for individuals of all gender identities. If a courteous, professional conversation between two individuals or a mediation facilitated by supervision or with support of the EEO office can't resolve the issue, then the misgendered individual may have a case for a formal complaint.
 - The Free Exercise and the Establishment Clauses ensure that all Airmen have the right to their own religious beliefs, so there is no obligation for anyone to personally agree with something they feel is outside of their religious beliefs. However, these clauses also state that federal agencies cannot favor or disfavor any one specific religious value system over another. As a federal agency, AFMC is required by statute not to engage in discrimination on the bases of Age, Disability, Equal Pay/Compensation, Genetic Information, Harassment, National Origin, Pregnancy, Race/Color, Religion, Retaliation, Sex, Sexual Harassment, and Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity. This position is pursuant to 29 CFR 1614.102(a)(3), which states federal agencies shall conduct a continuing campaign to eradicate every form of prejudice or discrimination from personnel policies, practices, and working conditions. Because current guidance and employment law recognize both same sex marriage and gender identities including nonbinary identities, these are the definitions we support when it

comes to inclusionary efforts as mandated by Federal law and Government wide-strategic plan. This said, our LGBTQ+ pride events such as this mentoring panel, are in no way intended to take away anyone's views of marriage or gender or violate anyone's religious moral code but rather enhance an awareness and understanding across differences. Lastly, our LGBTQ+ efforts (like this mentorship panel) seek to amplify inclusionary opportunities targeting this community in order to retain high performing LGBTQ+ employees and ensure that we are protecting ourselves from discrimination founded in biased based behaviors of offenders.

- How would you encourage leaders to be inclusive when establishing mentor-mentee relationships?
 - A great first step is to use gender neutral terminology as a starting point; it signals you're not making assumptions. If the discussion strays into areas of identities you're unfamiliar with, whether that's orientation, gender identity, nationality, race, etc., then learn about it from the individual or through your own research. Express an interest in their affinity groups and cultures. Last, visibly and actively participate in observances and holidays; actions and behaviors have a much longer impact than mere words.
- What advice do you have for LGBTQ+ members/employees entering into their first mentoring relationship?
 - Be OK with being misunderstood and your mentor getting it wrong until they learn. For many in the Greatest, Silent, and Boomer generations, you may be the first LGBTQ+ individual with whom they've had to build a personal relationship. That doesn't mean subjecting yourself to disrespect and harassment, but it does mean understanding, patience, and recognizing you're mentoring them as much as they are mentoring you.
- How do you feel differences in and experiences based on LGBTQ+/ally status should be discussed in a mentoring relationship?
 - This discussion is very similar to those between mentors and mentees of different races, ethnicities, religions, etc. We are an all-volunteer force and leaders are tasked with creating environments where the strengths of all individuals can best be capitalized. Leaders must build safe spaces for their employees and mentees. It's about a learning mindset and being OK with getting uncomfortable. If the only people you're mentoring are those who look, act, and talk like you then you're not preparing yourself to lead employees who don't.

Worse, you are likely falling prey to unconscious biases and passive exclusion.

- Is there something you wish your past straight/cisgender mentors knew/realized/understood as you transitioned or came out?
 - My over commitment to work was my running away from my identity. The stress of coming out to my family was terrifying and I hid from it until I was in my mid-20s. So, I hid in 14-hour work days, attaining two graduate degrees at once, sweeping quarterly or annual awards, etc. I don't know how they could have helped me attain a healthier work/life balance, but those years of repeated behaviors took a long time to break to attain a healthier work/life balance, stronger friendships, and an overall better me.
- What is the best advice you can give to help plan a career rather than simply work to keep a job?
 - First, choose the career. It's a choice you have to make, are you in or out? And for active service members moving every few years, you'll remake that commitment multiple times as you take on assignments. When you make that commitment, you are choosing to live your life the AF way and to use your strengths, knowledge, skills, and abilities to serve at the pleasure of the department. However, make sure you continue to build your personal skills and credentials and, most importantly, your relationships because we all have a life after our service. Make sure you build and invest in that life.
- How have mentors influenced you in your career?
 - In some cases, they merely directed me where to go and what to do because I was a young, ignorant officer without a clue what to do. In other cases, they afforded me decision space to flex my leadership muscles. Importantly, I believe you don't have to have an active relationship with all people you consider a mentor. I have a few individuals whom I consider mentors because they provided a negative lesson of what not to do. Those are as valuable as positive mentors.
- How do you balance your work and home life?
 - This is likely something we are all still learning. A good starting point is understanding that we're all cogs in the machine with a specific role to perform. Sometimes we get the opportunity to change that machine, which will take a lot of work, but largely we have a refined role. We start to imbalance when we take on additional roles that belong to others rather than empowering them and holding them

accountable to performing their role. Other than that, listen to your friends and family at home. Are they getting what they need out of the relationship they have with you? Are you disappointed in what you're giving to them? If so, something is out of balance.

- How and where do you find inspiration?
 - Simple, Airmen. One of my Airmen asking me to tutor him in his college physics class inspired me to start asking for help for myself. One of my peers coming out publicly after getting to know me inspired me to be more visible as an officer, engineer, and gay man. One of my supervisors using gender neutral terminology inspired me to lean in and commit to the organization that was a safe space for me to be authentic. We work in an amazing organization full of talented individuals, get to know them and let them motivate you. At the same time, keep an eye on the peer-adversary fight...if that doesn't inspire you to accelerate change or lose, little will.
- What do you do to constantly challenge your underlying beliefs and assumptions? How does this benefit you and the people you lead?
 - I am lucky to be blessed with a diverse group of friends who check me when I'm wrong, educate me when opportunity strikes, and support me when I need. I check in with them when I feel like I made a mistake, and they help me grow. This is why I'm a strong advocate for mentors finding mentees that do not align to the same affinity groups and, frankly, make the mentors a little uncomfortable. That's how we stretch our skills as leaders and break down our unconscious biases. In the end, this will help you capitalize on the strengths of all your people, and you will make leaps where others struggle to make strides while trying to force fit people into molds.