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Transitioning on the Job

Assisting the Evolving Trans Person to be Comfortable with Their Approach

by Keith Rogers, Chrysalis Volume 2 No. 4

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A good friend of mine near the top of the food chain at a major insurance company recently transitioned on the job from Larry to Lisa. She had campaigned quietly and effectively in her headquarters office and had visited among her colleagues and subordinates in the field offices. Her growing value to the organisation over twenty years had been confirmed by top management with her complete and heartfelt endorsement of her decision, communicated to more than 6000 employees in twenty-one district offices where she had supervisory responsibilities. Now came the hard part: real acceptance. Could she make others comfortable with her by showing she was comfortable with herself?

You've shown what you can do for them before you ask what they can do for you.

Came time for the company's annual golf tournament, always a serious war between Northern and Southern divisions of the organisation. If you can believe that (believe it), the most serious question about her transition was whether she would hit from the ladies' tees or the men's tees. In the eyes of the Tournament Committee, hitting from the ladies' tees would be a decided advantage for her side. She discussed her situation with me and we came up with a solution.

At the first hole, Lisa went first to the men's tee. She took out her driver and went through the ritual motions. Then she looked around with a smile, moved down to the ladies' tee, and did the same routine. Then she turned around and paced off the exact distance between the two tees, teed up halfway between them, and smacked that sucker out of the park, (to mix my metaphors). The President of the company high-fived her, and all were watching brethren applauded. The word then went forth over the company's "cafeteria telegraph" that she was cool - in other words, she passed with flying colours, pun intended.

Obviously, you are free to confront, challenge, and legally pursue all your rights to your job and to try and keep it via the adversarial route, if you wish. But, harkening to the heroic whistle blowers in the Challenger disaster and the Tail-hook scandal and many, many other classic cases, you can be quietly and not-so-gently harassed and hounded right out into the street, regardless of your legal, ethical and logical rights. From what I've seen, keeping one's job is mostly a matter of being accepted by corporate cultures.

Cynthia R. was one of the first male employees in a now established and prestigious Texas computer company. She has always had the longest hair in the company bar none, male or female, and she has leaned toward declaring herself pre-op and dressing in the female mode for a long time. But until recently, she never did anything about it. Even with her seniority and the feeling that many co-workers were tacitly aware of her feelings, she was fearful of the repercussions.

Then she attended a presentation I made at the Texas "T" Party on transitioning on the job. We talked afterwards. She has just written that she has selectively taken the first serious step to coming-out in the office. "I received the information you sent and set right to work". Translated, that means she took a good sample of a transitioning letter I sent her for reference, piggybacked her own letter on this, and sent it to some selected friends. She has begun to find active sympathy and support for what she wants to accomplish, and incidentally in the process has discovered a gay friend and another transgendered person in her firm, neither of whom she knew about before.

There may be some differences in style, but professionals deal in the same context of cultures as corporate employees. In the case of a very successful male lawyer in the tradition-bound deep south, some clients and a partner dropped away when he decided to transition. In order to successfully become she, she developed an aggressive individual plan. She was already living full-time as a woman when she decided she needed to go face-to-face with her clients, prospective clients and the important judges in her community. She gum shoed door-to-door with her key contacts, one at a time, one-on-one, with the salesman's understanding that you need to look at and listen to what people don't say to get a real feel for their feelings. Some transgendered persons send their colleagues a letter or letters of explanation. She achieved the same result person-to-person.

A guiding principle with any employer and associates or clients in any organisation is "no surprises", especially if you're going to eventually evolve in a radical different form. Don't jolt, embarrass, or blindside people. Give them time to digest the new evolving you. We all like to appear cool and rationally responsive; this is especially true of people who may be a little shaky in their own sexual identification.

No one is indispensable, but try and come as close as you can.

At any rate, as a result of intelligent spade work, the former Mike's professional debut as Andrea was boffo; in program print with complete biography as Andrea and on stage as faculty in a legal learning program in front of several hundred colleagues, most of whom had met only Mike, she "broke a leg" - meaning, she too passed with flying colours, pun intended again. And most importantly, she did

it the way nature does it, with no sudden surprises.

In all of this it goes without saying (but I'll say it anyway), that you have already proven that you're a good and valued employee. You've shown what you can do for them before you ask what they can do for you. No one is indispensable, but try and come as close as you can.

One of the rockiest parts on the road to transition is getting to the top decision makers through the chain of command. If you can help it, the last thing you want to do is to leapfrog over your immediate superior's head. And before you make your pitch to the ultimate boss, nothing will help so much as practicing your approach, or role playing. It gives you the idea of having been there before. In other words, be comfortable with your approach.

I have coached several transgendered persons in this method and it has worked most of the time. The system is simple. Meet with a knowledgeable friend as if he or she were your boss. You can have others witness and critique, if you like. Make your pitch. As your boss, your friend should ask you some hard questions. He or she can also try some tricks like incidentally tipping a glass of water on you to see if you fall apart or offering you a cigarette without an ashtray to see if you will react calmly and ask for an ashtray. Simple things, but, trust me, they've been used on me and I've used some of them over the years. Again, the advantage of this procedure is *deja vu*. You will have practised before you go in to see the key leader.

The chain of command applies to the self-employed also. Andrea heads her own law firm, nevertheless, she had an organised framework to deal with in the form of her local legal community. To deal with opinion leaders, she felt she couldn't start dealing with them directly herself. She used "mentors" to pitch and push for her. It's a matter of judgement, of course, as to whether or not others can do more for you initially than you can do for yourself. Everybody has a chain of command - it's just a matter of how you reach the top.

In another case, a pre-op executive in Chicago felt she had heard an unsatisfactory dress rehearsal of the pitch her advocate was to make to the boss before she saw him herself. So she bent the reporting relationship rules and went in herself. She rolled the dice and she won.

In contrast, Jennifer A. relied on her good friend and influential superior to make her case with the C.E.O., and she lost. The lead scientist in the consortium of energy companies, Jennifer was well-nigh indispensable, but her friend apparently couldn't translate her core beliefs to the ultimate decision makers. Her position was eliminated. She was flimflammed out of her job. It also goes without saying that you deserve a personal shot at saving yourself. But following proper corporate and professional protocol will often pave the way to a more positive personal audience with the top person.

And, psychologically it is harder for someone to fire you if they've gotten to know you up close and personal. You know that, but so does the decision maker, who may resist seeing you for that very reason.

Try, try as much as humanly possible to get as much of your righteous anger and frustration out of your system before you go in to persuade your boss that you are stable, sincere and worthy. The boss doesn't need to see the side of you that is mad as hell and isn't going to take it anymore. Studies presented at the International Conference on Transgender law and Employment Policy have shown that most employers are much more interested in your stability and your work productivity than your gender goals.

Once you have properly conditioned your employer through emissaries, a coming-out letter and/or other literature (all with the help of your employee assistance program, if possible), and have by personal contact shown them that the business person they can expect in the office everyday is going to be proper and normal, you can achieve your end results. So take that anger to a support group, friends and/or a good therapist. Deal with it with the right people in the right place.

Again, Andrea sets a good example. She sees a therapist and has an empathetic support group. Recently, she used the support group to work through her anger at an "insensitive friend" who kept calling her by the male pronoun in public places. She didn't spray her frustration all over her business relationships. She brought the problem to the group.

Work, work on the right approach and process for keeping your job. As an incentive, paraphrase the old Ben Franklin proverb: the prospect of being hung focuses the mind wonderfully.

Enough serious thoughts and sage for a bit. One of the best tools to use in a successful relationship is humour. Yes, we're still talking about serious issues; your livelihood and maybe your whole future, your vestments, your pensions. But try to kid yourself lightly and politely through this in the presence of all and sundry in your organisations and business framework. Reason? Your ultimate grace under this ultimate pressure will impress and persuade people more than any ringing declaration of personal freedom. Trust me. Then go find your support group and scream your head off.

An example; Laura S. was a very successful counsel and C.E.O. of an Oil Company. Well before her transition, she had prepared her department with her own gentle but self-deprecating sense of humour. When she returned from surgery, her troops had shopped at a maternity store and had a big "It's a Girl!" banner over her door. We kid people we are comfortable with and care about. Enough said. Laura's supervisors had to accept her after that.

Other transitioning executives I worked with have been on target: when one said something dumb in a business meeting, she recovered nicely. She said with wry good humour, "that's what happens when you're going through a sex-change - it sucks out your brains". Another time, discussing the dire predictions for people who break chain letters, another executive said, "Yes, I broke the chain once, and look what happened to me." Opportunities abound to put people at ease with humour. And humour can be used to put people in their place too.

Once I silenced a room full of religious fundamentalists with a one liner. Some declared that the transgendered women I was escorting

to and through a difficult social situation was actually a man. I replied, "Nobody's perfect". You could hear the proverbial pin drop before the wondrous, bemused and mostly sympathetic laughter started in the back of the hall. Granted, my "snapper" was straight from Hollywood's *Some like it Hot*, but it worked to diffuse the immediate discomfort abounding.

How do you handle the sexual harassment you may be subjected to while you're in transition? Again, humour helps, and you can always vent your frustration in the confines of your support group. But you still have to go into the office/arena and face the lions.

Most of the gossip, suspicion, scorn and ridicule which can develop around your transition is born of ignorance. When you're able to go one on one with opinion leaders in your business community and otherwise spread the true word through close and sympathetic colleagues, the situation usually improves. The truth may not set you completely free, but it can make the work environment a lot more comfortable.

Inject information about yourself and transgenderism into your organisation's "cafeteria telegraph" (i.e. the people at all levels in the lunchroom and the executive dining room who seem to know who's sleeping with whom and everything else confidential, including salaries, and sexual orientations). And be available to answer questions.

Remember, in many cases you are dealing with colleagues who are not that secure in their own sexual and gender identities. Another important point: I strongly suggest that you not waste your energy trying to find out exactly who said exactly what about you and your situation in the rumour mill. In most organisations, this is like punching feathers.

As you make plans to transition, and before you get started, try to cultivate some close female friends (or male friends if you're F.T.M.). They can be surprisingly sympathetic and protective, among your strongest up-front as well as back channel advocates.

Even before she went into her full transition mode, Laura S. did some quiet volunteer legal work for some feminist groups. When she came-out, the old girl network in the Denver legal community helped her maintain her standing in the profession without skipping a beat.

Office politics is not unlike any other kind of politics - there are people who just aren't going to share your point of view, no matter how persuasive you are. They just aren't going to vote for you and your transition. What you need is a working majority of supporters to help you keep your job. Don't waste your time or your ego trying to convince everyone to be on your side. We're talking here about progress, not perfection.

A classic case involving many of the successful steps and techniques we've been discussing involved a sales executive for a national furniture chain. She was still in an androgynous stage when she first broached her transitioning plans to her local manager. He was an unsophisticated fundamentalist: to say the least, he was confused and very conservative in his reaction. So she used her considerable native intelligence and survival skills. She called across the country to the corporation's human resource department and told them what she wanted to do. It was a first for them, too. But since she wisely connected with the employee assistance program pros early on, she was officially approved and supported.

Meanwhile, back on the home front, she began applying cosmetics in slow degrees, taking seven months before she was fully made up. Her conservative store manager got used to a little lipstick one week, three weeks later a little mascara. She was already looking at offers in another field for reasons other than transition problems, but had she opted to stay, her strategies were solid. Her best asset was her winning sales way, and her hole card was her wry sense of humour and her honesty. Thus, some of her strongest advocates turned out to be her customers. The manager's wife was also one of her more sympathetic supporters. If our heroine has opted to have a long lunch with this lady to explain her husband's passive aggressive attitude, she would probably have relieved some of the pressure.

Dress is one of the supposedly "small" things which people watch closely. Add the fact that you will be under double scrutiny in a glass bowl, and it's clear that dress is something to which you should pay close attention.

Try to walk the line where clothes are concerned. In other words, don't over, or under dress. This is of course subjective. But do some research, look around you at what your co-workers are wearing and consult with friends.

Consider Lisa and her successful transition. Not unlike the big decision as to which set of tees she should play from, the office pool was betting on what she would wear on her first day at the job as a female. I kid you not. Some, in their ignorance, weren't so sure what to expect. She dressed in a conservative, attractive women's business suit.

Most transgendered women want to be fashionable and make their own statement, but they realise they need to blend in. In their coming-out letters, some transgendered persons mention how they will dress and subtly negotiate this condition with management.

Be prepared to answer co-worker's questions simply, specifically and as completely as possible. Remember that most are coming from nowhere in their understanding of your situation. You will have to go back to Gender Identity 101 and explain transsexualism. What you tell them, depends on how much you think they ought to know. Many people are satisfied with a superficial explanation: it's as much as they can digest.

If you're conditioning your company to accept your transition and you're being treated seriously, start gathering your facts and friends right now. Be ready to persuade and propose. Whatever the timing of your official meeting with your boss, he can move it up or delay it at his discretion - he's the boss. Be ready whenever he is.

A case in point: A pre-op friend had reached the point at which it was necessary to either transition to a full feminine mode or leave the company. She had left the decision in the hands of the C.E.O. She called excitedly to say a "go" or "no-go" meeting had been set in three weeks. I advised her to be prepared for the meeting as soon as possible, to expect the unexpected. Sure enough, four days later,

the C.E.O. had a change of plans, looked at his watch, and told her immediate supervisor to "get her in here, now". She was ready. She won the day, and more importantly, a future with the company. Be prepared. And also be prepared at any point with physician's certifications and other official papers you have attesting to bureaucracy's approval of your transition decision.

Where your company and/or your professional colleagues are concerned, it helps if they can see somebody else's letterhead approving of your plans. Official endorsement may not be necessary so far as your feelings are concerned, but third-person approval always helps with others.

In addition to the known obstacles in your organisation, be aware of hidden or subtle opposition. Be realistic. Any organisation is a pyramid - there is less and less room the further you go. Even if you work for the most benevolent, benign and accepting corporation in the whole world, when you transition, you are handing extra ammunition to your logical and natural competitors for higher positions. And in the wonderful world of business, many people will use any ammunition they can get against any opposition.

It's wise to also be ready to handle religious "ranters". I'm not talking about the abstract and larger philosophical questions posed by official religious organisations. I'm talking about the in-your-face types who declare that if "Gawd" had intended you to be an etc., he would have made you an etc."

In other words, in the "ranters" best tunnel vision way, they feel you have a moral problem rather than a medical one. Ask them whether if they had a hare lip, they wouldn't try to correct it cosmetically. Tell them that two thirds of your being, your intellect and your emotions, is in the wrong physical frame. Ask them what's wrong with becoming congruent. If you're inclined to answer in kind, tell them that God is not finished with you - yet.

Where possible, have legitimate and knowledgeable supporters with you when you meet with management to propose that you transition on the job. This is not just to protect your legal rights, it will give you a psychological lift.

If you've ever made a public speech or stood up to make a point in a public meeting, you know it helps to make eye contact with those who will react actively and positively to what you say. Do that, if possible.

Remember, it takes time to build towards your goal. It is a process to success, not a fact accomplished from the word go. As a long time member of a twelve step program, I can tell you I didn't get sober all at once. Keep working.

Most successful transgendered persons I have met are bright, energetic, focused and brave. You have to be in order to overcome the ignorance and prejudice of the general population. Some day, perhaps fifty years from now, there will be a respectable, accepted transgender associate, with an office in every city and town. There will be an annual T.A. charity ball and the junior league ladies will vie to be on the Board of Directors of the Association - but not yet. Now to mix my metaphors, again, tee up that ball and smack that sucker out of the park.

Keith Rogers is a journalist who retired as a corporate vice-president in a Fortune 500 company. In more than thirty years on various organisational ladders, he has been both a subordinate and a supervisor. He is a spiritual and financial supporter of A.E.G.I.S., I.F.G.E., I.C.T.L.E.P. and the Texas "T" Party.

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