**Flexible Organisations: Creating a Healthy and Productive Context for Gender and Sexual Minority Employees**

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It is fairly straightforward to imagine how mindfulness and acceptance skills can help gender and sexual minority (GSM) individuals to live vital and effective lives, even when experiencing difficult circumstances. In an organisational setting, one can even imagine how individual or group training sessions can help to promote mindfulness and acceptance. But what about at the team and organisational levels of the workplace: Can we design teams and organisations that are ‘mindful’ and that can promote mindfulness and acceptance in their employees?

We believe that this is possible through the concepts and techniques that are associated with Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999). ACT maintains that a process called psychological flexibility is at the core of helping people to maintain good mental health and behavioural effectiveness. It refers to people’s ability to focus on their current situation, and based upon the opportunities afforded by that situation, take appropriate action towards pursuing their values-based goals, even in the presence of challenging or difficult psychological events (e.g., thoughts, feelings, physiological sensations, images, and memories; Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda & Lillis, 2006). Later in this chapter, we will note how we can use ACT to increase psychological flexibility in GSM employees. First, how can we use the concept of psychological flexibility to create an organisational environment in which these individuals can thrive, both emotionally and in terms of their productivity.

**Psychological flexibility**

A key implication of psychological flexibility is that, in any given situation, people need to be flexible as to the degree to which they base their actions on their internal events or the contingencies of reinforcement (or punishment) that are present in that situation. ACT maintains, and research suggests, that people are more psychologically healthy and perform more effectively when they base their actions on their own values and goals, regardless of the context in which they find themselves (Bond, Hayes, Baer, Carpenter, Guenole, Orcutt, Waltz & Zettle, 2011).

When acting flexibly, people will experience, at times, difficult, indeed unwanted, psychological events (e.g., anxiety), whilst pursuing their values-based goals. Thus, a great deal of ACT theory and practice emphasises the use of *mindfulness* strategies for experiencing these events, so that they have less of a negative impact on individuals’ psychological health and their ability to pursue their values-based goals. When people are mindful of their psychological events, they deliberately observe them on a moment-to-moment basis, in a non-elaborative, open, curious, and non-judgemental manner (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Thus, psychological flexibility emphasises both committed action towards meaningful goals and mindfulness. It is this combination of mutually enhancing processes that is likely to account for the many mental health and performance benefits associated with this individual characteristic (see Bond et al., 2011 for a review).

**Organisational flexibility**

We can design organisational characteristics that produce an organisation that is both ‘mindful’ and committed to pursuing its values, such as utilising, supporting and developing the talents of GSM employees. These characteristics, combined, herein, in an organisational flexibility model (Bond, 2015) ,have been widely studied in the area of organisational behaviour (OB). OB is a field of study that investigates the impact that individual (e.g., personality, mental health), group (leadership, teams), and organisational characteristics (e.g., structure, processes) have on organisational effectiveness (including the health of individuals) (Robbins & Judge, 2009). We will now discuss how these OB characteristics can combine to create a flexible environment in which GSM employees can thrive, whilst the organisation flourishes, as well (Bond, 2015).

**Six characteristics that promote organisational flexibility**

***Purpose and goals (encourages a commitment to values****)*

The purpose of an organisation guides its goals (or vision) and day-to-day actions (or mission) (Marquis, Glynn and Davis, 2007). An organisational purpose has three characteristics: (1) it meets a need in the world that will function to make the world a better place (e.g., anything from making machines for cancer treatment to promoting diversity); (2) it meets a need in society (e.g., providing transport for Londoners); and, (3) it is aspirational but not sustainable (e.g., to ‘preserve and improve human life’—Merck pharmaceuticals—one must always work to develop new drugs and treatments) (Marquis et al., 2007). Many organisations increasingly have a mission to promote not only equal treatment for GSM employees but also to provide a context in which they are actively valued (e.g., though organisation-supported LGBT societies whose meetings senior management will occasionally attend and address).

***Planned action (encourages a commitment to values)***

Organisations need to take planned action in order to further their purpose, mission and goals. Planned action is facilitated via numerous project management techniques and strategies (see Martin, 2009). They clearly link the mission and values of the organisation to specific actions that they need to take in order to realise their values. Importantly, planned action techniques view problems as an inevitable part of working towards goals, and they should be expected and addressed (Martin, 2009). They are not seen as signs of trouble, undesirable, blameworthy or even threatening to goal achievement; rather, they are accepted as an inevitable part of the process and should be revealed and addressed as quickly as possible. Planned action techniques can help organisations to move forward towards their values, or mission, to create a nurturing environment for its GSM employees. As these techniques assume stumbling blocks along the way, these hurdles are less demotivating when they occur, and so it is easier to identify strategies to overcome them.

***Situational responsiveness (encourages both a commitment to values and a mindful organisation)***

Situationally responsive organisations are those that keenly pursue and react to feedback from their task environment (Leavitt, 1965): their customers, competitors, suppliers, government regulators, and unions. They take operational and strategic decisions based more on that feedback (which includes market research, customer feedback, union engagement), and less on their brand (e.g., traditional and reliable) and culture (‘This is the way we have always done things around here’). Organisations that overly base their actions on their brand or culture/history are likely to be less flexible, adaptable, and, hence, less able to pursue effectively their purpose/values and goals. As Leavitt (1965) noted, for organisations to remain effective—to pursue their purposes and goals—they have to adapt successfully to the changes in their task environment. Those that are overly entangled in their brand or culture find it hard to make those necessary changes.

Culturally bound, unresponsive organisations face many problems in terms of their effectiveness. They are also ones that may find it harder to ‘move with the times’ and adopt GSM policies that are adapted by responsive organisations; thus, even if senior management is committed to progressive GSM policies, an unresponsive, culturally reactionary organisation (propped-up, perhaps by recalcitrant middle managers) may make it difficult to implement such policies.

Responsive organisations need to undergo (nearly) constant change, which is difficult and often anxiety provoking. It is no surprise, therefore, that the organisational development literature is replete with strategies to overcome this psychological ‘resistance to change’ (e.g., French & Bell, 1999). One such way is to ‘design out’ (or at least minimise) the rigid structures and processes that can inhibit situational responsiveness and so better to overcome this resistance to change. This is accomplished, in part, through effective work design.

***Effective work design (Encourages a mindful organisation)***

Organisational researchers have long hypothesised that various forms of *work design*—that is, ways that people interact with their work tasks—can limit the negative impact that work demands have on people's physical and mental health. Karasek's (1979) demands-control model perhaps most explicitly makes this prediction. It maintains that high demanding jobs will only have detrimental effects on people, such as coronary heart disease and psychological distress, if people have to approach their work without sufficient job control. If organisations provide people with some influence over how they carry-out their (even demanding) work, they will not only experience fewer and less deleterious effects, but they will also perform their work more effectively and be more motivated in carrying it out. A comprehensive review of the work control literature largely supports this hypothesis (Terry and Jimmieson, 1999).

Other well-established and empirically supported OB theories (e.g., the job characteristics model [Hackman & Lawler, 1971] hypothesise that other work design characteristics can also have advantageous impacts on the health, performance, and attitudes of workers; these include support in carrying out one's work, the opportunity to do a variety of tasks, and the ability to do a complete job, from start to finish (e.g., a team that builds a car from start to finish, or guiding a customer complaint from the time it is made to the time it is resolved). As for job control, there is longstanding and considerable research that shows the health and performance benefits of these and other work design characteristics (Humphrey et al., 2007).

Many GSM employees face a considerable level of ‘demands’ that many other categories of employees do not face. If they come out in the workplace, they may be, or feel like they could be, ostracised or given less support and desirable work design characteristics than others (e.g., more monitoring—hence, less control). Even if they do not come out, they may try to avoid unwelcome questions about their personal life and, thus, not seek the normal work support from colleagues that research shows is so essential in order to promote well-being and effectiveness. Thus, formally optimising work design characteristics provides a far better context in which GSM employees can thrive.

***Openness to discomfort (Encourages a mindful organisation)***

Organisations can evoke challenging, difficult emotions in people. ACT shows how it is useful for individuals to *accept* and be open to those emotions, in the pursuit of their values. At the organisational and team levels, we suggest that this same open stance is crucial; indeed, the OB literature champions many different structures, processes, strategies, and leadership approaches that require such openness to discomfort. Providing workers with job control is one such design principle that many managers find anxiety provoking; others include allowing employee participation in decision-making; clearly, openly, and honestly communicating with employees in a timely manner; and, a transformational approach to leadership, which requires a personal, open, and ‘lead by example’ leadership style (Bass, 1998).

All of these beneficial OB characteristics (and many others) require leaders, and the teams and organisations that they design, to be willing to be uncomfortable in the service of the organisations’, and their own, purpose and mission. Avoiding implementing these constructive characteristics, in order to avoid discomfort, compromises the effectiveness of an organisation, and the health of its employees. It is the role of leaders to implement them and serve as a model to their employees as to the need to, and how to, experience disquiet at times, in the pursuit of an organisation’s purpose, and their own, related, individual values.

GSM employees who are ‘out’ at work may, at least at first, arouse discomfort in other employees. Such discomfort has the potential to lead to discrimination and damaging prejudices. If, however, the organisation values inclusion, then managers need to be willing to experience any disquiet that they may have and implement policies, procedures and a culture, in which bullying and discrimination are not tolerated; instead, GSM employees are seen as valid and useful as any other employee.

***Awareness (Encourages both a commitment to values and a mindful organisation)***

ACT advocates the need for individuals to be in the *present moment* and be aware of, and open to, their internal events, and we extend this same advice to teams and organisations. Indeed, it is consistent with a whole field within OB that focuses on maintaining system *awareness*: human resource management. Most organisations of any size will have an human resources (HR) department that will develop policies and practices that function either to understand what is happening within the organisation (e.g., through performance evaluation and staff surveys), or train employees (essentially) to be aware of their actions (e.g., through diversity training and career development planning).

HR can be vital in monitoring patterns or pockets of GSM discrimination in an organisation, whether it is flagrant (e.g., openly gay people never get promoted in X department) or insidious (e.g., the turnover rate is higher for GSM employees). If HR are properly monitoring these issues, the organisation has the opportunity to take appropriate action to correct them; and, where HR see best practice, they can then promote that practice in other departments.

**Team flexibility**

In this section we highlight team flexibility characteristics that, like the organisational ones just discussed, serve to increase the flexibility of teams. We then discuss how these team characteristics may be used to facilitate better working conditions for GSM employees.

***Team purpose***

The organisational flexibility model, discussed above, draws our attention to the importance of purpose in guiding an organisation’s goals and day-to-day actions (Bond, 2015). The concept of *team purpose* would appear to serve a similar function at the group level. Specifically, an effective team has a clear and precise purpose (aligned with the organisation’s) that provides direction and guidance for team members (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993). This purpose is an overall vision that helps teams stay on track under both stable and changing organisational conditions (Robbins & Judge, 2009). Below, we review how team purpose has been used to unite members of divided teams.

Team members may differ from each other in a number of ways, ranging from demographic characteristics (e.g., age, sexuality) to personal attributes (e.g., personality, work attitudes). If these differences become apparent then faultlines can develop. Team faultlines are “hypothetical dividing lines that may split a group into subgroups based on one or more attributes” (Lau & Murnighan, 1998, p. 328). Such faultlines may lead to negative team outcomes such as poorer social integration (Rico, Molleman, Sánchez-Manzanares, & Van der Vegt, 2007), and emotional and task conflict (Li & Hambrick, 2005). However, Rico, Sánchez-Manzanares, Antino, and Lau (2012) found that superordinate goals (i.e., goals aimed at establishing a common purpose) facilitated better decision-making in teams with gender and education faultlines. Furthermore, van Knippenberg, Dawson, West, and Homan (2011) found that shared objectives (i.e., a shared focus consistent with team purpose) within senior management teams reduced the negative influence of gender and job history faultlines on performance. Finally, Homan, van Knippenberg, Van Kleef, and De Dreu (2007) examined whether the negative impact of diversity faultlines could be reduced by encouraging groups to value diversity. They found that informationally diverse groups (i.e., groups that differ in their knowledge bases and perspectives) performed better on a decision-making task when they held pro-diversity, as opposed to pro-similarity, beliefs.

In sum, both establishing a team purpose, and integrating diversity as a central part of a team’s purpose, unified members of divided teams and allowed them to perform more effectively. Thus, team purpose represents a possible lever that could work to combat the unhelpful effects of team division. Whilst this research did not specifically involve GSM employees, increased disclosure of this aspect of identity in contemporary workplaces suggests that it could also become a basis for group division; in which case, organisations would be wise to value employees’ diversity in terms of gender and sexuality.

***Effective teamwork design***

The organisational flexibility model drew our attention to the importance of effective work design as a means of limiting the detrimental impact of demanding work on employees’ health (Bond, 2015). The concept of *effective team ‘work design’* would appear to serve a similar function at the group level. In the present context, we focus on the design characteristic: team social support, which is the extent to which a team provides opportunities for support and assistance (e.g., task completion support, emotional support). Team social support is critical for effective team functioning (see Rosenfeld & Richman, 1997), and in the present context, we highlight its particular importance to the workplace-identity-management decisions of GSM employees (e.g., decisions around whether or not to “come out” at work).

In the workplace, GSM employees consistently have to decide whether to disclose or conceal their identity. This is not a straightforward decision, and outcomes of disclosure have been found to be quite varied. For sexual minority employees, there is evidence that workplace disclosure can lead to negative outcomes such as discrimination (Waldo, 1999), as well as positive outcomes such as higher job satisfaction and lower job anxiety (Griffith & Hebl, 2002). For gender minority employees, there is evidence that workplace disclosure experiences are often difficult and traumatic (Budge, Tebbe, & Howard, 2010), but that they can also relate to higher job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and lower job anxiety (Law, Martinez, Ruggs, Hebl, & Akers, 2011). These varied findings suggest that environmental characteristics of the context in which disclosure occurs may affect the consequences of that disclosure; in particular, research indicates that the characteristic of team social support may be important. Specifically, Ragins, Singh and Cornwell (2007) found that sexual minority employees who worked in teams that were more supportive reported less fear and disclosed more, than did employees who had lower levels of support. Furthermore, Ragins and Cornwell (2001) found that sexual minority employees were more likely to report discrimination when they were in teams that were primarily heterosexual and when the organisation lacked supportive policies. Finally, Dietert and Dentice (2009) found that workplace support was an important determinant of whether transgender individuals chose to disclose their gender identity, or intent to transition (i.e. the process of aligning one’s physical body with their gender identity), at work.

In sum, higher levels of team social support appear to foster conditions in which GSM employees feel more comfortable to disclose their identity, and in which the outcomes of this disclosure are more positive for the GSM employee. Thus, effective teamwork design represents a possible lever that could help GSM employees positively to manage their identity at work.

***Team reflexivity***

The organisational flexibility model highlights the importance of organisations maintaining awareness through consistently monitoring individuals, teams and departments (Bond, 2015). The concept of *team reflexivity* would appear to serve a similar function at the group level. Team reflexivity is the ‘extent to which group members overtly reflect upon the group’s objectives, strategies and processes, and adapt them to current or anticipated endogenous or environmental circumstances’ (West, 1996, p. 559). It involves actions such as questioning, planning, exploring and analysing (Hoegl & Parboteeah, 2006) and is based on the notion that there is a need for continual reflection within a team’s constantly changing environment. Below, we review how team reflexivity can foster conditions in which minority team members experience better quality exchanges during task completion.

Firstly, evidence suggests that reflexivity may function as a context in which cooperative team behaviours are more likely to occur. De Dreu (2007) showed that perceived cooperative outcome interdependence (i.e., people in groups perceiving their own goals and those of others are cooperatively linked) was related to more information sharing, more learning and more effectiveness, when team reflexivity was high. That is, the increased level of systematic and deliberate information processing afforded by higher reflexivity allowed a more constructive and open exchange of task-relevant information to take place. Secondly, evidence suggests that minority dissent is more likely to occur in a reflexive team. Minority dissent is where a minority in a group publicly opposes the beliefs, ideas or procedures assumed or favoured by the majority in the group (De Dreu & West, 2001). Research indicates that such minority dissent promotes beneficial team performance outcomes, because it improves the quality of decision-making (Dooley & Fryxell, 1999). De Dreu (2002) showed that minority dissent was associated with more innovation and higher team effectiveness, when there were higher levels of team reflexivity.

In sum, team reflexivity appears both to encourage team cooperation and provide a platform for dissenting views in a team. As such, it represents a possible lever by which to improve the quality of team-member exchanges. Whilst this research does not specifically involve GSM employees, more cooperative and open team climates may foster more equitable exchange conditions for these individuals. Specifically, GSM employees, by virtue of their different life experiences, may bring a unique set of ideas and expertise to a decision-making scenario. However, it may be hard to voice these ideas when they are distinct from the experiences of the majority. If an environment fosters more open exchange and provides a more receptive platform for individual voices, this may allow GSM employees to more effectively contribute their unique perspectives to group tasks.

Just as the concept of team reflexivity has not been examined using GSM employees, we are not familiar with any widely used interventions at the organisational or team levels (discussed above) that have been empirically tested using this population. This is unsurprising for at least two reasons; firstly, GSM acknowledgement, let alone acceptance, by society, is relatively new and is still very incomplete. Thus, organisations and OB researchers have not yet felt the pressure, or pull, to examine the extent to which organisational and team characteristics affect outcomes for GSM employees. Secondly, methodologically rigorous studies are difficult to conduct at the organisational and, to a lesser extent, the team levels. Thus, far more OB research is conducted at the individual level for all employee populations, including, as we shall see in the next section, for GSM employees, where at least one study has examined the relationship between GSM individuals and psychological flexibility.

**The individual**

In this final section, we discuss the individual-level construct of psychological flexibility, and explain how it may be used to facilitate better mental health and performance amongst GSM employees.

***Psychological flexibility and identity management in the workplace***

As previously discussed, GSM employees must continuously make decisions about whether to disclose their identity or to conceal it. We suggest that psychological flexibility may be useful in both helping GSM employees to determine whether to disclose their identity, and to manage that process if they do decide to disclose.

With regards disclosure decisions, psychological flexibility may make people more aware of their working environment, and how they can adapt their behaviour according to the needs of that environment. Whilst in many countries laws protect GSM people and their rights of expression, such laws are certainly not universal. Furthermore, even in countries where gender and sexual identity are protected by law, organisational policies and practices around equality, as well as general climates of acceptance, vary greatly. Therefore, GSM employees need to be aware of the conditions in which they are operating, and exercise care in their disclosure behaviours. Psychological flexibility allows people to be more mindful of their internal experiences, and, as a result of this awareness, less likely to attempt to control these experiences. As a consequence, psychologically flexible people have more attentional resources for noticing and responding to their environments in effective ways (Bond & Hayes, 2002). Whilst GSM employees may value being open about their identity, they must also consider their own psychological and physical safety. In some contexts it may be workable to behave in accordance with one’s disclosure values, but in another, it may be workable to behave in ways that preserve personal safety. Psychological flexibility may help GSM employees be flexible to the degree to which they base their behaviours on their values, or on the (sometimes punishing) contingencies within their current environment.

If GSM employees determine that a situation is safe for disclosure, psychological flexibility may further aid them in managing this process. As previously noted, within supportive contexts, disclosure can have beneficial outcomes for GSM employees (Dietert & Dentice, 2009; Ragins et al., 2007). However, the emotional turmoil and fear of rejection associated with disclosing one’s identity may be one of the most difficult challenges to overcome. In this context, psychological flexibility may help GSM employees make contact with their values (e.g., being open about one’s identity), and take steps towards achieving those values (e.g., disclosing to colleagues), even when difficult and challenging internal experiences (e.g., fear of rejection) show up.

***Psychological flexibility and coping with workplace discrimination***

As previously noted, GSM employees may be subject to workplace discrimination. This may occur in countries where gender and sexual identity are not protected by law, as well as in organisations with poor policies and practices around equality. GSM charities and societies are working towards legislation that will offer employees’ protection; however, it is unrealistic to believe that cultural change will be quick or straightforward. Therefore, increasing psychological flexibility may be useful as a complementary strategy for helping GSM employees cope with discrimination. There is early evidence that higher levels of psychological flexibility may be an important personal resource for sexual minority employees. Lloyd, Karlsson, Frasca, West, Thompson and Bond (2015) found that experiences of overt and covert sexual minority workplace discrimination related to increased levels of strain, which in turn, related to increased likelihood of leaving employment. However, they found that this process of health decline was only significant for people with low, but not high, levels of psychological flexibility. Furthermore, psychological flexibility was found to relate to increased engagement, which in turn, was found to relate to reduced turnover intention. Thus psychological flexibility appears to offer sexual minority employees some protection from the harmful effects of discrimination. In sum, psychological flexibility may represent an individual-level lever that has the potential to affect positive change for GSM employees.

Whilst this is only one study, its findings are consistent with benefits proposed by psychological flexibility theory. In addition, the findings from this study suggest that further research may be warranted that examines the extent to which ACT can improve the well being and behavioural effectiveness of GSM employees who choose to disclose. Clearly, researchers and practitioners are only beginning to explore interventions that can improve the lives of GSM individuals in the workplace. We believe that psychological flexibility offers an empirically based, conceptual guide that can be used at the organisational, team, and individual levels to comprehensively enhance the organisational context in which GSM individuals work.

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