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Diversity & Inclusion

**Question:** I appreciate the idea of diversity and inclusion, but I'm so confused by all of the letters involved in LGBTQIA+ that I don't know where to start. Can you please help me make sense of it?

**Answer:**

I get it. As a straight, cisgender female, all of the different terms were a lot for me personally to take in and start to comprehend. Especially because I know I'm not the only one who grew up without giving any of it a second thought (re: PRIVILEGE), I am happy to help provide a roadmap here. At this year's Association of Law Firm Diversity Professionals' Conference, I heard Ms. Avery Belyeu from Lambda Legal present on this topic, and she provided more clarity than I'd ever experienced from a presentation on this topic. Here's what I learned.

There are four different aspects to consider when understanding where one individual is on the various spectrums:

- Sex assigned at birth (aka biological sex)
- Gender identity
- Gender expression
- Sexual Orientation (or Attraction)

Keep in mind that each of these are truly SPECTRUMS, so someone can fall on one side, or somewhere in between the extremes for any of these. The term *non-binary* simply means NOT one of two options.

**Sex assigned at birth** is what shows up on a birth certificate based on the doctor's assessment of the visible physical anatomy of that individual. What is not considered at this point is whether the chromosomes align with genitalia, or even whether the brain is wired similarly to the outward manifestation of a person's sex. The science is more complicated than many of us have been led to believe. Approximately one percent of people are considered *intersex*, which means that it's not as clear cut, and the doctor has generally decided the classification at birth. The term *hermaphrodite* used to be used for this, but it is no longer an accepted word in today's society. Those who are intersex advocate for the option of an X marker rather than indicating M or F on legal documents, but we're not quite there yet.

**Gender identity** is how an individual identifies with the cultural norms around masculinity and/or femininity. This is entirely a social construct that defines what has typically been called "male" or "female" based on gender norms. How someone identifies is very personal and doesn't have to be shared unless they choose to do so. If your gender identity aligns with your sex assigned at birth, you are considered *cisgender*. Conversely, if your gender identity does not align with the sex you were assigned at birth, you would be considered *transgender*.

**Gender expression** has to do with how we choose to show the world how masculine or feminine we are. This includes how we dress, whether we wear makeup, how we have our hair styled, and which pronouns we prefer. When someone doesn't consider themselves she/her/hers or he/him/his, the singular form of they/them/theirs can be used. You may also sometimes see ze/zir/zem, which is less common, but another form of they/them/theirs. If someone goes back and forth between genders, they are considered *gender fluid*.

Finally, there's **sexual orientation or attraction orientation**. Ms. Belyeu believes there's more to this orientation than simply sexual attraction since someone can be interested in another human being on multiple levels – mental, emotional, spiritual, romantic, and of course physical. There are lots of terms that fall within this category of someone does not only consider themselves to be

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“straight” and only attracted to the opposite sex. *Homosexuals* are attracted to members of the same sex; men are typically referred to as *gay* and women as *lesbian*. *Bisexual* individuals are attracted to members of both sexes. *Pansexual* individuals are attracted to people across the spectrums of gender identity and gender expression. And finally *asexual* (aka “ace”) individuals don’t consider themselves attracted to anyone.

I also learned that there is some baggage around the term *queer*. While younger generations have reclaimed this word and even consider anyone within any of the spectrums above in the *queer community*, older generation members of the LGBT community still find the term especially offensive after it was used quite cruelly in their earlier years. For that reason, they may even steer clear of groups that include the “Q” in LGBTQ.

There’s a great visual you may find useful in the [Genderbread Person](#).

I hope that helps. It’s not easy stuff, and even attempting to better understand shows you care about creating an inclusive environment. Here are some other things you can do as you continue to encourage diversity and inclusion at your firms:

1. Educate yourself and those in your firms so no one can claim ignorance of these terms or concepts.
2. Aim to create an inclusive culture for all individuals by making sure your dress code doesn’t contain any gender-specific items.
3. Proactively create a policy and procedure to help someone who may want to transition genders while at your firm. It will make a world of difference to that individual as they go through an already difficult process if you’ve already done this legwork ahead of needing it.
4. If you can, establish single stall restrooms to prevent otherwise uncomfortable situations for those who don’t identify as cisgender. Buildouts or moving to a new space are especially convenient times to consider these accommodations.
5. Introduce yourself by saying, “My pronouns are ...” after you say your name to make it less awkward for anyone who may not express their gender as obviously as you do. Or even include pronouns in your signature block. Normalizing these practices show others that you’re an ally and willing to create a safe space.
6. Encourage allies that ask, “How can I support you?” and affirm others’ experiences as valid. Listen to people and ask appropriate questions like, “Which pronouns do you use?” And of course, advocate alongside others for the LGBT community as an ally yourself.

