From Criminalization to Equality:

How the Positive Space Campaign can Foster Inclusivity Within the Workplace

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The Problem

As it stands, Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex and asexual (2SLGBTQIA+) employees in the federal public service and military experience challenges resulting from workplace cultures of bullying and discrimination.[1] Recent studies have indicated that despite formal anti-discrimination legislation and strategies, the 2SLGBTQIA+ community continues to experience discrimination, bullying and microaggressions.[2] In a Canadian study looking at corporate and government workplaces, 62% of 2SLGBTQIA+ employees indicate having witnessed or experienced discrimination regularly.[3]

The experience for employees who identify as belonging to a gender minority (such as trans and non-binary) and employees who identify as belonging to a sexual minority (gay, lesbian, and bisexual) also differ significantly. Workplaces are found to be less safe by employees belonging to a gender minority community, with 66% of employees indicating a feeling of lack of safety at work and as few as 23% being 'out' at work (i.e. to openly declare one's gender or sexual identity).[4] In comparison, 59% of employees belonging to a sexual minority indicate a feeling of lack of safety at work with 53% being out in the workplace.[5]

Overall, as many as 53% of 2SLGBTQIA+ employees hide their sexual orientation or gender identity at work, with 35% of 2SLGBTQIA+ employees feeling compelled to lie about their personal lives in their workplace.[6] Despite hostile work environments, 85% of 2SLGBTQIA+ employees indicate being open about their sexual orientation and gender identity to be important at work.[7]

Discrimination and hostility can create serious health problems and lower workplace productivity amongst 2SLGBTQIA+ employees. Workplaces where 2SLGBTQIA+ employees are hiding their identify can result in increased anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and social stress.[8] These effects can be compounded for intersectional minority groups within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community; these

[1] Galupo, M. P., & Resnick, C. A. (2016). Experiences of LGBT Microaggressions in the Workplace: Implications for Policy. In Sexual Orientation and Transgender Issues in Organizations (pp. 271-287). Springer International Publishing.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Sasso, T., & Ellard-Gray, A. (2015). In & Out: Diverging Perspectives on LGBT Inclusion in the Workplace. Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion. Retrieved: https://ccdi.ca/media/1070/20150528-report-lgbt-inclusionin-the-workplace-en.pdf

[4] Ibid. [5] Ibid.

[6] Fidas, D., & Cooper, L. (2015). The cost of the closet and the rewards of inclusion: why the workplace environment for LGBT people matters to employees. Retrieved from: http://hrc-assets.s3-website-us-east-1.amazonaws.com//files/assets/resources/ Cost_of_the_Closet_May2014.pdf

[7] Sasso, T., & Ellard-Gray, A. (2015). In & Out: Diverging Perspecitives on LGBT Inclusion in the Workplace. Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion. Retrieved: https://ccdi.ca/media/1070/20150528-report-lgbt-inclusionin-the-workplace-en.pdf

[8] Lewis, R. J., Derlega, V. J., Griffin, J. L., & Krowinski, A. C. (2003). Stressors for gay men and lesbians: Life stress, gay-related stress, stigma consciousness, and depressive symptoms. Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 22(6), 716-729.

include those who belong to a visible minority, individuals with disabilities, and women, amongst others.[9]

Respectful and inclusive workplaces can improve the overall wellbeing of 2SLGBTQIA+ employees. Research has demonstrated that inclusive policies, supportive colleagues and managers, and efforts to create a sense of belonging significantly reduce discrimination and bullying, thus improving the climate for 2SLGBTQIA+ employees.[10] A solution that advances these strategies is the Positive Space Initiatives.

Background

The University of Toronto is credited for introducing the modern Positive Space initiative. Beginning in the early 1990s, the university sought to challenge cultures of anti-2SLGBTQIA+ language on campus through broad training strategies to demystify stereotypes and prejudices about gender and sexual minorities.[11] The campaign was so successful that high schools began adopting similar practices, recognizing that cisgender and heterosexual students may stop using homophobic and transphobic language if they had a greater understanding of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community.[12]

In the early 2000s, building upon the success of these campaigns, employees of the Ontario public service began to adapt the campaign as well as various workshops into training for the public sector.[13] This was originally implemented as a non-mandatory, half-day training workshop run by employees in the Ontario public service on a voluntary basis. Because some of the topics covered in the workshop could be interpreted as political (e.g., same-sex marriage and the inclusion of gender identity in human rights codes), the training was non-mandatory and volunteer-run.[14]

In the late 2000s, Andrea Markowski brought Positive Space training to the federal public service through her role at Corrections Canada. Working as a warden, Markowski recognized that inmates, as well as staff, who identified as a part of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community were experiencing discrimination.[15] The training was considered successful and shortly after, saw similar initiatives in other ministries including: Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, Ministry of Justice, and the Canadian Armed Forces.[16]

[9] Adams, E. M., Cahill, B. J., & Ackerlind, S. J. (2005). A qualitative study of Latino lesbian and gay youths' experiences with discrimination and the career development process. Journal of Vocational Behavior, 66(2), 199218.

[10] Huffman, A. H., Watrous-Rodriguez, K. M., & King, E. B. (2008). Supporting a diverse workforce: What type of support is most meaningful for lesbian and gay employees? Human Resource Management, 47(2), 237-253.

[11] Space, P., & Jain, S. (2015). University of Toronto. Posters & stickers

[12] Lytle, M. C., Vaughan, M. D., Rodriguez, E. M., & Shmerler, D. L. (2014). Working with LGBT individuals: Incorporating positive psychology into training and practice. Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity, 1(4), 335–347. https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000064

[13] Holley, L. C., & Steiner, S. (2005). SAFE SPACE: STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT. Journal of Social Work Education, 41(1), 49–64. https://doi.org/10.5175/JSWE.2005.200300343

[14] Ohemeng, F.L.K. & McGrandle, J. Public Organiz Rev (2015) 15: 487. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11115-014-0285-8

15 Interviews with federal public servants.
16 Ibid.

The Positive Space Initiative in the federal public service recognizes that many employees have little or no education in regard to 2SLGBTQIA+ communities (including 2SLGBTQIA+ employees).[17] Without proper awareness, comments made in the workplace can be unintendedly offensive, thus contributing to the culture of harassment and discrimination that many 2SLGBTQIA+ employees describe as damaging.[18]

The Positive Space Initiative, in particular the training sessions, acts as an important intervention to challenge traditionally accepted behaviours by informing participants of the cultural experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ people and provide strategies on inclusion.[19] Today, certain Positive Space campaigns in the federal public service include more than a training workshop; for example, in addition to multi-day training, the Ministry of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada has organized community events (e.g., participation in Pride) and created an employee resource group where all members can connect, share best practices, provide peer support and develop new strategies for inclusion.[20]

Why is Positive Space Initiative Struggling?

The Positive Space Initiative is still relatively new in the federal public service, and like other new initiatives, it has challenges that need to be addressed.[21]

First, the Positive Space Initiative within the federal public service is not centralized through a group, agency or ministry. This has resulted in individuals running training programs without a consistent framework; training in one ministry could present certain information while another ministry presents opposing, or even contradictory, information.[22] Another challenge is a lack of shared evaluation; short- and long-term evaluation helps determine what works and what needs improvement, thus the sharing of evaluation amongst departments is crucial. A lack of uniformity can create confusion among which training methods work best.[23]

Furthermore, the lack of centralization has forced most Positive Space Initiatives to be volunteer run. Most employees have indicated that this volunteer run strategy is unsustainable because their primary job has to come first, and as a result forces the key project to be delayed.[24] Additionally the complex tasks of developing a workshop, creating campaigns, and supporting an employee

17 Ibid.
18 Huffman, A. H., Watrous-Rodriguez, K. M., & King, E. B. (2008). Supporting a diverse workforce: What type of support is most meaningful for lesbian and gay employees?. Human Resource Management, 47(2), 237-253. 19 Ohemeng, F.L.K. & McGrandle, J. Public Organiz Rev (2015) 15: 487. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11115-014-0285-8
20 Interviews with federal public servants.
21 Huffman, A. H., Watrous-Rodriguez, K. M., & King, E. B. (2008). Supporting a diverse workforce: What type of support is most meaningful for lesbian and gay employees?. Human Resource Management, 47(2), 237-253.
22 Interviews with federal public servants.

23 Lytle, M. C., Vaughan, M. D., Rodriguez, E. M., & Shmerler, D. L. (2014). Working with LGBT individuals: Incorporating positive psychology into training and practice. Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity, 1(4), 335–347. https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000064 24 Interviews with federal public servants.
resource group often require skills an employee may not have and the amount of work frequently leads to volunteer burnout.[25]

Additional challenges include that because the training is de-centralized and non-mandatory, those who could benefit the most from Positive Space training may choose to opt-out of 2SLGBTQIA+ education on the basis of an existing discriminatory or stereotyped-based understanding of gender and sexual minorities.[26]

Finally, managers have indicated that there is no connection between Positive Space training and existing government strategies such as the Gender-Based Analysis+ policy framework; this makes it difficult to advance similar initiatives or projects.[27]

Recent Policy Changes

In 2016, Prime Minister Trudeau announced the appointment of a Special Advisor on LGBTQ2 issues to work on the development and coordination of the Government of Canada's LGBTQ2 agenda both within government and across community based non-profit organizations. The Advisor worked inside a new LGBTQ2 Secretariat placed inside the Prime Minister's Office. This marked the first time the government appointed an elected official to take action on 2SLGBTQIA+ public policy issues.[28]

The following year, the federal government apologized to 2SLGBTQIA+ Canadians for a history of discrimination and oppression of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. This apology included an acknowledgement of colonial discrimination, Criminal Code legislation, police actions, public humiliation, mismanagement of the AIDS crisis, and the campaign against 2SLGBTQIA+ public service members and military personnel. There was also an acknowledgement of emotional and mental health trauma, systemic oppression and rejection, and a recognition that 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals experience higher rates of discrimination, violence, mental health challenges, and other socio-economic challenges.[29]

The Prime Minister's appointment of a Special Advisor and the apology from the federal government have laid the groundwork for recognizing the history of discrimination by the federal public service towards its 2SLGBTQIA+ employees.[30] These actions have also renewed the government's commitment to the development of new strategies and best practices moving forward.[31]

25 Ibid. 26 Ibid.
27 Ibid. 28 Canada, Prime Minister's Office. Prime Minister announces Special Advisor on LGBTQ2 issues. (2016, November 15). Retrieved from https://pm.gc.ca/en/news/news-releases/2016/11/15/prime-minister-announcesspecial-advisor-lgbtq2-issues 29 Canada, Prime Minister's Office. Remarks by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to apologize to LGBTQ2 Canadians. (2018, November 28). Retrieved from https://pm.gc.ca/en/news/speeches/2017/11/28/remarks-prime-minister-justintrudeau-apologize-lgbtq2-canadians

30 Smith, M. (2019). Homophobia and Homonationalism: LGBTQ Law Reform in Canada. Social & Legal Studies. https://doi.org/10.1177/0964663918822150 31 Ibid.

It should also be noted that 2SLGBTQIA+ issues are acknowledged in the 2019 Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, marking the first time such issues have been included in a national report.[32] The report connects the history of colonization to heteronormative and cis-normative values that were forced upon Indigenous communities; several Calls for Justice have been made in regard to 2SLGBTQIA+ peoples.[33]

Solutions (Recommendations): Investing in the Positive Space Initiative

We recommend for the federal public service to create a centralized committee comprised of public servants and community leaders that would be responsible for creating a government-wide framework for the Positive Space Initiative. This would include: a standardized training curriculum and evaluation strategy, ideas for and methods around organizing community engagement and public events (e.g. participation in Pride) and models for the organization and implementation of employee resource group and peer support services. Such a committee would need to be funded, i.e. comprised of paid employees rather than volunteers so as to ensure that government employees can effectively devote the time to the project; an option could be a sabbatical on the committee.

We also strongly assert that Positive Space trainings need to be mandatory for public servants so that we can ensure that each employee is aware of anti-2SLGBTQIA+ discrimination and is provided the tools to create a safe and inclusive workspace. Through the centralization of these tasks within a designated committee, Positive Space Initiative employees will be deeply engaged with the program while also absorbing new skills and expertise from peers and industry leaders.

Such a process will require significant government investment and acknowledgment of the previously discussed apology and creation of the LGBTQ2 Secretariat.

The creation of such a committee will also allow for the implementation of Employee Resource Groups (ERGs). ERGs – also known as affinity groups and employee networks – have played an important role in creating safe space organizations for individuals with a diverse range of identities, including 2SLGBTQIA+ employees. These ERGs advocate for changes to organizational policies in hopes of making them more inclusive for 2SLGBTQIA+ employees; these groups have also worked on developing identity-based communities within professional environments. Of those who are employed in an organization with ERGs dedicated to the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, 53% of 2SLGBTQIA+ employees reported feeling safer in their work environments.[34]

Challenges & Considerations

Although the Positive Space Initiative will provide immeasurable benefits to employees of the federal public service, we recognize that there are various challenges in regard to and upon implementation:

32 National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (Canada), & Canada. Privy Council Office. (2019). *Reclaiming power and place: The final report of the national inquiry into missing and murdered indigenous women and girls*. Ottawa: Privy Council Office.

33 Ibid.

34 Sasso, T., & Ellard-Gray, A. (2015). In & Out: Diverging Perspectives on LGBT Inclusion in the Workplace. Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion. Retrieved: https://ccdi.ca/media/1070/20150528-report-lgbt-inclusionin-the-workplace-en.pdf

- How will a federal Positive Space Initiative ensure that it acts in a non-partisan way when 2SLGBTQIA+ people are still not equal under the law?

- How will a federal Positive Space Initiative ensure that it is supporting intersectional communities including rural, remote, and Indigenous communities?

- If funding is attached to Positive Space, how will we ensure that the program is sustainable?

These are questions that we need to continue to explore and work collaboratively with public servants and leaders in the 2SLGBTQIA+ community to develop innovative solutions.

Conclusions

As there are many existing public servants entering retirement, the Canadian public service is experiencing a unique period of change. A revitalization of the public service will help ensure that all persons are treated equally, with compassion and understanding.

Specifically, young people looking to enter the public service will expect that 2SLGBTQIA+ values are reflected in their workplace; the Positive Space Initiative is a strategy that can ensure the workplaces reflect diverse communities and cultures.

While there are many challenges associated with the implementation of a federal Positive Space Initiative, we believe there are profound benefits for employees of the Canadian public service. An individual's place of employment should be one of efficiency, triumph, and joy; at the very least is should be one of respect, inclusion, and welcomed diversity. A funded, mandatory, and centralized Positive Space Initiative will help employees feel safer in their work environment and promote the aforementioned values. Such an initiative will help bring awareness to the 2SLGBTQIA+ community and help nurture a public service that has a grim past.