The gender-friendly organization: How to address non-binary realities in the workplace

July 17, 2023

An award-winning researcher and gender diversity advocate, Dr. Lee Airton, PhD, explores the current challenges organizations face in addressing gender diversity and gender expression in the workforce.

Drawing from their book, *Gender: Your Guide*, they share actionable tips for corporate leaders on how to build and grow a more gender-friendly workplace.

Gender-friendliness: Why pronouns matter

“Gender diversity is not something that is only relevant to people who are transgender,” Dr. Airton points out.

At the heart of the matter is the fact that expectations about gender begin even before a child is born, following an ultrasound and a sex assignment. However, ways of experiencing gender vary greatly from one individual to the next, regardless of visual cues, and may not follow mainstream narratives.

A gender-friendly organization takes for granted that there will be gender diversity within its staff, including transgender employees and employees who are not transgender but may be gender non-conforming. Normalizing the everyday use of gender-neutral pronouns like singular “they” is only one way of welcoming gender non-conforming, non-binary and transgender workers.

Two key aspects to watch for in an inclusive (gender-friendly) workplace

- **In a gender-friendly organization, no one is told by other people that they are not who they are, either implicitly or explicitly**. Seeing how everyone has their own relationship with gender, and diversity is a given, no assumptions are made—nor suggested.
- **In a gender-friendly organization, no one is told that how they're presenting or doing gender is wrong, either implicitly or explicitly.** Consequences for

not acting feminine or masculine enough are part of gender expression discrimination. As Nirvana once sang: come as you are.

Four gender-friendly leadership practices

Dr. Airton has four tips for corporate leaders who want to better welcome gender diversity.

1. **Recognize that persistent misgendering, even if unintentional, is likely gender identity or gender expression discrimination: an organizational not interpersonal concern.** No one enjoys being repeatedly misgendered. The generalized use of “Mr.” and “Ms.” or similar casual expressions of gender identity ends up amounting to discrimination. “We can't require trans employees to educate other people,” says Dr. Airton. Normalizing the use of gender-neutral pronouns is an organization’s responsibility, same as avoiding the needless use of gender identifiers in communications.
2. **Go for a “good mistake.”** Mistakes happen and it’s okay. It takes a while to learn to consciously use the singular “they” for just one person. You called someone by their wrong name or pronoun? Don’t draw extra attention to your mistake or make it a big deal. “Apologize, rephrase and move on,” advises Dr. Airton. Remaining neutral is key in not erecting extra barriers.
3. **Address gender issues like you would climate issues.** If a transgender or gender-nonconforming person has a difficult experience in your workplace, for example if a conflict arises because of other’s responses to their gender expression, don't treat this as an isolated incident. Choose the bigger picture and think of it as an indication of your work climate, instead. '"This happened' is not the same as 'This is happening here,'" reminds Dr. Airton. Who else might be at risk, and where else is this happening?
4. **Lead by example: leverage your authority**. Leaders are responsible for setting the tone and cultivating an inclusive space for everyone. Be there for gender diversity-related activities such as speakers and other events put on by 2SLGBTQ+ employee resource groups, talk with others about the events, and spread their takeaway messages. Encourage other leaders to attend. Position attendance as a positive use of your time. “I want to invite folks to be *seen* to support trans and gender-nonconforming people within their organization,” explains Dr. Airton, “and not only heard.”

Learn more

A comprehensive account of Dr. Airton’s work is available on their website, leeairton.com, which also includes youth and parent/caregiver resources for learning to deal with gender identity and gender expression discrimination at school.

BLG | Canada's Law Firm

As the largest, truly full-service Canadian law firm, Borden Ladner Gervais LLP (BLG) delivers practical legal advice for domestic and international clients across more practices and industries than any Canadian firm. With over 800 lawyers, intellectual property agents and other professionals, BLG serves the legal needs of businesses and institutions across Canada and beyond – from M&A and capital markets, to disputes, financing, and trademark & patent registration.

blg.com

BLG Offices

Calgary

Centennial Place, East Tower
520 3rd Avenue S.W.
Calgary, AB, Canada
T2P 0R3

T 403.232.9500
F 403.266.1395

Ottawa

World Exchange Plaza
100 Queen Street
Ottawa, ON, Canada
K1P 1J9

T 613.237.5160
F 613.230.8842

Vancouver

1200 Waterfront Centre
200 Burrard Street
Vancouver, BC, Canada
V7X 1T2

T 604.687.5744
F 604.687.1415

Montréal

1000 De La Gauchetière Street West
Suite 900
Montréal, QC, Canada
H3B 5H4

T 514.954.2555
F 514.879.9015

Toronto

Bay Adelaide Centre, East Tower
22 Adelaide Street West
Toronto, ON, Canada
M5H 4E3

T 416.367.6000
F 416.367.6749

The information contained herein is of a general nature and is not intended to constitute legal advice, a complete statement of the law, or an opinion on any subject. No one should act upon it or refrain from acting without a thorough examination of the law after the facts of a specific situation are considered. You are urged to consult your legal adviser in cases of specific questions or concerns. BLG does not warrant or guarantee the accuracy, currency or completeness of this publication. No part of this publication may be reproduced without prior written permission of Borden Ladner Gervais LLP. If this publication was sent to you by BLG and you do not wish to receive further publications from BLG, you may ask to remove your contact information from our mailing lists by emailing unsubscribe@blg.com or manage your subscription preferences at blg.com/MyPreferences. If you feel you have received this message in error please contact communications@blg.com. BLG's privacy policy for publications may be found at blg.com/en/privacy.

© 2026 Borden Ladner Gervais LLP. Borden Ladner Gervais LLP is an Ontario Limited Liability Partnership.