

Celebrating Pride in 2022: Coming Out and Allyship in the Workplace

By Michelle E. Phillips, Eve R. Keller,

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Meet the Authors



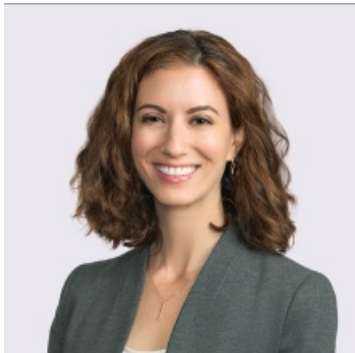
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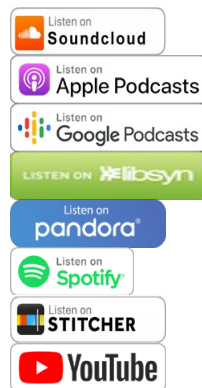
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Details

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While June is a month to celebrate our Pride, it is also a time to reflect on the importance of coming out in the workplace and how all employees have a critical role to play as allies to LGBTQ staff, clients and community. On this episode of We get work™, we will explore coming out in the workplace and allyship through shared personal journeys and how to build a roadmap for allyship in your organization this June and going forward.

Jackson Lewis P.C. · Celebrating Pride in 2022: Coming Out and Allyship in the Workplace



Transcript

Alitia: Welcome to Jackson Lewis's podcast, We Get Work, focused solely on workplace issues everywhere and under any circumstances, it is our job to help employers develop proactive strategies, strong policies, and business-oriented solutions to cultivate a workforce that is engaged, stable, and diverse. Our podcast identifies the issues dominating the workplace and its continuing evolution and helps answer the question on every employer's mind. How will my business be impacted? While June is a month to celebrate our pride, it is also a time to reflect on the importance of coming out in the workplace and how all employees have a critical role to play as allies to LGBTQ+ staff, clients, and our community. On this episode of we get work, we will explore coming out in the workplace and allyship through shared personal journeys and how to build a roadmap for allyship in your organization this June and going forward.

Our host today are Angie Cavallo and Michelle Phillips. Having joined Jackson Lewis in 2022 as the director of diversity, equity, and inclusion, Angie is a licensed attorney who is dedicated to raising awareness and furthering the firm's commitment to a diverse and inclusive workplace. Michelle, a principal in our

White Plains office and as part of her practice, conducts training on race, ethnic, intergenerational, interfaith, LGBTQ+, and other inclusion issues. She's the founder and co-leader of JL's Out Professionals and Allies in Law Group and is a national firm leader on LGBTQ+ issues. Michelle and Angie will sit down with Eve Keller and Michael Roche associates, respectively, in the Philadelphia and Pittsburgh offices of Jackson Lewis, who will share their personal stories, inspiring others to ensure all LGBTQ+ employees feel supported and safe in the workplace. Michelle and Angie, how does speaking openly and often about coming out an allyship in the workplace create a better and more supported environment for all employees and how does that impact my business?

Michelle: Welcome everyone to our pride podcast. I'm very excited to be presenting with each of you. It's awesome because we have Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, New York represented, so very disparate groups. And really what we're going to talk about today is what does this month mean to you? What does it mean to you from a coming out perspective? What does it mean to you from being an ally? What tips and best practices can we provide to both the firm and our clients on how to be a good ally during this month? Just to kind of get us started, Mike, can you tell us a little bit about your journey to Jackson Lewis and how it is that you both came out in the military and then also at Jackson Lewis?

Mike: Sure. Thank you for the question. So for me, I guess, my journey to Jackson Lewis was through the military. In 2011, I was living at home with my mother, working at her pizza shop and I needed to get back to school. I needed to finish my undergrad and I grew up right down the street from an air force base in Pittsburgh. And a lot of my friends had joined and I was like, "Oh, I'm going to do that too. Why not?" But at the time don't ask, don't tell was still around. And they were in the middle of transitioning after the repeal. So it was iffy. I wasn't necessarily out of the closet either, but the military offered me an opportunity to go back to school and it was structured, which I love, has great resources. So I decided that was the right path for me and coming out then while still in the military was scary.

I think it's always anxiety-ridden, even nowadays, coming out to anyone. But the one thing I liked was my superiors in the military were very driven about mission success. They didn't care if I was gay, they didn't care if anyone around me was gay. They wanted to make sure that I was doing my job properly and doing it well. So when I did come out, that's the message I received was are you checking all of these boxes? Are you doing your job? Well, yes, then keep doing that. So it was a great experience, I should say, for me, coming out. And then Jackson Lewis, while I was in the military, I worked to get my undergrad, started law school and nothing I do is traditional as my former story just said, I was interning for a corporation in their labor and employment office. And I knew I wasn't going to be able to stay there after law school. And Jackson Lewis is nationwide, one of the best known, if not, the best labor and employment law firm in the country.

I had an angle. I needed to get in somehow. So our law school set up mock interviews for the one and two Ls. And at this point, I was a 3L. I didn't need the interview experience. All the interviews were done and I was like, "I'm going to schedule one anyway." So I scheduled one with the Jackson Lewis partner here and

it went well and I stayed in contact with him ever since. And fast forward five years into private practice, I got an email in my spam box one day, actually, that I checked from Mike Stief. And he's like, "Hey, you interested? Let's make this happen." So at that point, coming out of Jackson Lewis, I was heavily involved in the Local Bar Association and the LGBT rights committee here. And everyone in this office in the Pittsburgh office is pretty involved in the BAR association as well. So I knew everyone here and everyone knew that I was involved with the LGBT rights committee. So it was a pretty easy, smooth transition to hey, the ring on my finger means a husband, not a wife.

Michelle: That's awesome. And, Eve, what about yourself? Can you describe your coming out process here at the firm and just in general?

Eve: Yes, definitely. Well, thanks for having me, Michelle, and that's awesome, Mike. That's a pretty incredible journey that you've been on. So for me, when I interviewed for Jackson Lewis and I stepped into the interview, I already have that plan for myself. It's been a plan I've had in the last few years that when I introduce myself to people that I'm hoping will become part of my life either professionally or personally, I want to tell them openly just in conversation about my sexual orientation, so that I make sure it's a place that I'm going to feel comfortable.

When I come in on a Monday and I'm asked what'd you do over the weekend or what'd you do on vacation? It's important to me to be able to say, "Oh, well my wife and I went out to dinner or we went to some family." So I just think I made that decision because in the past, when I don't do that, it really closes off doors. I'm not able to share this huge part of myself. And I want my coworkers to know me. I want to know them. I want to be able to get to know them. And so something I'm going to do right up front so I know that they'll accept me before I accept any offer.

Michelle: Yeah. I mean, it's just so interesting to hear about both of your journeys, so different, but yet the one common thread is that for you to be who you are, for you to be authentically who you are, it means having to reveal an important part of yourself. And I think of it almost as, to a certain extent, a generational difference, but there is no way I would've been caught dead stating that I was gay. There's not even any scenario I could think of where I would be comfortable doing that. And I admire that in both of you, that that's important to you, that there are firms like ours and others where you can come and you can be who you are. And it's not a big deal. I was so concerned with economically how it could potentially impact me or yeah, okay, it's against the law to discriminate based on sexual orientation, but that's a distinction between someone's lived experience versus what the law prohibits.

I applaud both of you and I know Angie, you have a lot to say as well on this topic, but I just think it's so important and we talk about just coming out and just how we can be supportive to each other, particularly during the month of pride. I mean, Angie, for yourself, what's your thinking in terms of this area? I mean, we haven't even talked about it.

Angie: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, hearing the three stories that all of you just

gave, it's interesting because there are generational differences and it does make me happy that it seems like it gets a little bit easier. Michelle, you talking about when you first joined the firm and having to feel closeted or fear, I mean that does tend to get a little bit easier for some folks, Mike and Eve telling their stories of coming out in the interview process, which is much different, but there's also hardship in each of the stories and no matter who you are or what generation you're a part of, there's still hardship in having to come out over and over, especially in the workplace. And that's why I think allyship is so important, especially to talk about this month. So, Mike, why is allyship so important to you?

Mike: Well, for me, just to piggyback off of what Eve said. Her experience of coming out was establishing her comfortability at the beginning, and to get that she needed allies to be at the firm there to accept her as she is. Allyship, for me, it's two-fold. It's educating yourselves and others so that everyone around you is comfortable and you're able to, especially in the workplace, be a productive employee for the company. And second, it's celebrating everyone's authenticity, especially in the Pittsburgh office just a couple weeks ago, we went and marched with the LGBT pride parade. I mean, there were thousands and thousands of people downtown. We had company shirts on and it was really just a showing of care and support that you don't get everywhere. And it was great that Jackson Lewis, here, really had that. And that's why allyship is important. And we're lucky that we have that here.

Angie: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, that sounds like such a great form of workplace community to have, especially your straight colleagues marching beside you at a pride parade, something that would've been unheard of. Probably if I were to ask Michelle, that would've been unheard of when Michelle joined the firm. I see her rolling her eyes now and I saw those photos and some of those videos of the Pittsburgh office marching. And it really did, it warms my heart as such a true spirit of allyship in the workplace. What about you Eve? Why is allyship so important to you?

Eve: Yeah, I mean, allyship is very important to me. And as Mike was saying in the interview, I had allies in there. They heard me just telling them and just in the normal course of conversation about who I am as a person and it was accepted. And also I was told that this is something that's important and valued in the firm. And so I think allyship, to me, is just showing up for people through your words and your actions. I mean, just thinking about the interview process again, after I told them about who I am and my hobbies and interests, it's so powerful for a supervisor, someone with authority to be able to turn around and say, "Well, that's great. Thanks for sharing. Let me tell you about me and what's important to us." And if something that's said right away is that we value inclusion, we value diversity. That's who we are. That just, I think, opens up a lot of doors for people and makes candidates and people in the workplace feel safe to talk about those sort of things.

Michelle: We talk about safety, we talk about psychological safety, right? So it's not just about not being physically harmed, but being a place where you can just be who you are in every sense of the word in terms of what that values. Mike, I know you were talking a little bit about Pittsburgh and the parade, but it feels like the

allyship in your offices really transcends many different affinity groups and that's just a true testament to Marla's leadership and just others, but just the way that you're very tightly connected and tight knit. And I'd love to hear more about what allyship looks during the month of pride, specifically.

Mike: Sure. So I recommend going to the LinkedIn page right now because our office pictures, what we just posted today and it's rainbow everywhere.

No, but it's great. It's a very familial feel in this office. We get along well. I mean, it's late nights, it's a grueling job and we all in it together and we all support each other here, regardless of our backgrounds, regardless of what affinity group we fit in, what boxes we check. We're all here to support each other through everything because if we make each other better, we're better for that. So especially in pride, Marla has really, really taken the reins and said, "Listen, our office is going to compete in the best decorating office. We're going to March pride and we're going to get clients involved too." And it's been a really, really powerful message, not just to the people in the firm, but to also our clients that we support LGBT rights and we're not just a corporation putting a rainbow flag on our logo.

Michelle: Yeah, no. That's so important. I mean, I've just been thinking about like how many different pride presentations I've delivered this month alone for clients, just there's so much to cover. And it's interesting because we're talking a lot about all the positive things, but it also, when we think about allyship and we think about the employee resource groups, it's also a place that you can go to if things aren't going well, right? So if someone says an inappropriate remark or someone treats you in a way that you don't think is respectful, whether it's discrimination or just in general it's not respectful to you, as us being allies for each other, it's another place that you can go to have your concerns heard. Eve, what about for yourself? What does allyship look like this month?

Eve: Yeah. So when I think about pride month, well, first off Philly also had a lot of rainbows and decorations today. We are, I think, fierce contenders in this competition of most pride. But I think for me, pride has always been... It was sort of my entrance into feeling part of the community. I feel like that was when I first started feeling part of something, my first time going to a pride parade in New York and seeing other people celebrate this community.

And so I think now pride can be a great way for people who are allies and for who want to know more about the community, who want to support, it's a first step for everybody to come together for this parade, a celebration. There's a local parade in my neighborhood and there are families with their kids. We were talking about corporations, Starbucks, all these larger organizations now and they're all coming together to say, "Yes, we're here, we're celebrating." And I think it opens up conversation. And I think it's a first step to become part of it, either as a member of the LGBT community or as an ally.

Michelle: And for Angie, just as a DEI professional, any thoughts that you have in terms of allyship in the workplace, specifically?

Angie: Yeah, absolutely. And not just during pride month. For folks listening that here are some of this healthy competition back and forth, here at

Jackson Lewis, one of the many things we're doing for pride is a pride office decorating contest. And while it's fun and we're lawyers and we like to compete, it's also about bringing folks together and showing that we support one another, that we care about the LGBTQ community, that we care about our LGBTQ colleagues and there are so many other really impactful and also really simple ways that you can be an ally to the LGBTQ community in the workplace. So for example, one thing would be just not making assumptions about the people that you work with. And I think Mike and Eve both alluded to this when they talked about their spouses.

But if you see me in the office for the first time and you just meet me and you see that I have a wedding ring on, being a good ally means not just assuming that means that because I'm a woman or I present the way that I present that I have a husband, that's what being an ally means. And that way you avoid making the person who's a member of the LGBTQ community have to keep coming out over and over because there can be some trauma in having to do that every time that you meet someone and it's the same thing with pronouns. So at Jackson Lewis, we talk a lot about pronouns and it's really important to us for really good reasons, but not assuming someone's pronouns. So instead of assuming a pronoun, just ask somebody what pronouns they want to be referred to.

And that's so simple, but it can be so meaningful and impactful to the people that are on the receiving end of that kind of kindness. And one of the things I'm really proud of at Jackson Lewis is that we've rolled out recently a pronoun initiative. So giving folks the option to put their pronouns in their Outlook email signatures, and you'll hear sometimes when this gets brought up, you'll hear a lot of straight cisgender folks say, "Why do I have to do that? I'm not a member of the LGBT community. My pronouns are easy to identify. Why should I have to list them so specifically on my signature?"

But what I think people forget is when you're a straight cisgender man or woman, and you are the one putting your pronouns on your email signature, even though that sounds really obvious to you, you're actually demonstrating fantastic allyship because you're prompting others to think about pronouns before they just assume someone's pronouns. And you're also making it easier for folks, like non-binary folks who might use they, them pronouns, you're making it much easier for them to list their pronouns without feeling like they're such an outsider.

Michelle: You used a couple of different terms, just so we're all understand what you're saying. You use the term cisgender, you use the term non-binary, you haven't used trans, but I'm sure you will use that term as well. What do all these different things mean?

Angie: That's a great question. And you even asking is demonstrating exactly what an ally should do is to ask questions when you don't know something. So cisgender is simply someone who's personal sense of self and their own sense of their gender is in alignment with the sex that they were assigned at birth. And then transgender would be somewhat of the opposite of that and someone whose personal sense of self or how they view their gender differs from the sex that they were assigned at birth. And then that's an umbrella term. So you'll hear lots of

terms under that folks will use, so non-binary, the term gender fluid or agender, it's all this diverse spectrum of what gender means to someone, as opposed to just defining yourself as I was assigned female at birth and I identify as a woman or as female.

Michelle: Yeah, I mean, I remember when I first started advising clients on transgender and gender non-binary issues, it was actually about 20 years ago. And I remember the first time I spoke at the Out & Equal conference and a third of my audience was transgender and it was the most different type of audience I had ever been around. And I felt a sense of discomfort. I had not been around that many people and I just decided to be open and understanding and listen and ask questions and really demonstrate allyship in a way, what is it like to be in an audience where you're always not the mainstream person? And so just through that collaborative process, through reading a lot, through going to conferences, through following the law, the cases, to advising clients, it's so important that we demonstrate that openness and that listening and that non-judgmental way of being about different people because this is someone's life.

The most interesting thing that I ever heard as an ally is when someone will say, "So when did you make the change?" It's actually not that the person has made the change. Their identity has always been what their identity is. They're just coming out to you about that change. And when I put it into that perspective and that's... What I try and talk with clients about is so how can we make this the smoothest journey for this person given the likelihood that people are going to say inappropriate things, ask inappropriate questions? Really, so what can we as employers do to make this be the most successful journey, not just for the person who's transitioning absolutely for them, but everyone involved?

Angie: To sort of piggyback off that. I think that part of what's being a good ally is to continuously educate yourself on LGBTQ issues because it's not something that's stagnant. Things look so different now than they did five, 10, let alone 20 years ago. And a lot of folks will think that I have a gay friend or I have gay family members or I work at a really diverse company and think that alone is enough to be a good ally, but being a true ally does entail constantly educating and reeducating yourself because what LGBTQ and all of the other letters that come after that looks like is going to continuously change.

And you really need to adapt to what's going on in the world or political climates and all of those things affect and impact the needs of LGBTQ folks. And if we're talking about the workplace, the needs of LGBTQ folks in the workplace will vary at any given time, depending on what's going on in the world. So you really do have to be a good ally by educating yourself over and over and not just once and done.

Michelle: Yeah. And no one knows the answers, right? It's not like if there's a legal answer, right? And I think us as lawyers, we want the legal answer to these things and it's really just an openness and just gaining a greater understanding because someone's journey looks very different than someone else's. And Mike, just to bring it back to you, I mean, I remember one of the great things when you joined the firm was just that connection between the veterans group and the LGBT Opal

resource group. And so how do these different groups work together? I'd love to get your thoughts on that.

Mike: Sure. So I think all of the resource groups compliment each other really well. There's a lot of intersectionality. Most of us fall into more than one of the affinity groups or at least we can participate in. And the one thing I love about our LGBT Opal resource group is that we seek out allies. We want more people involved. We want people to really be there, even if you don't identify as LGBTQ, which is great.

And actually in order to learn more about other affinity groups, because I, myself, am a little ignorant and onto some of the other ones, I know the firm has started to film during Black History month when Veterans Day comes up, they've been interviewing employees to explain, this is who I am. This is my background. This is the affinity group. So we can educate ourselves more about those groups and how we can be allies because even as a gay white man, there are things like Angie, you were saying, that I need to stay educated on even within the LGBTQ community. So there are absolutely things I need to be educated on from other affinity groups and the fact that the firm has started to make it easier for us to learn that has been great.

Michelle: Yeah. Angie, that's in no small part to the arrival of yourself and Kimya Johnson, your whole group has really taken us from 1.0 to 3.0 in terms of our affinity research group, so it's awesome having you and having all of your shared knowledge and that you bring that, I mean, office decorating contests, okay, fine. But we would not have gotten it off the ground without you. And the way you're pushing us further in our journey as a firm, like the pronoun project that you're talking about. All that's so important. We'd love to get just your final thoughts on how we can work together with resource groups.

Angie: Yeah. No, well, I appreciate that we went from 1.0 to 3.0, that's, that's quite a feat. And employee resource groups or affinity groups are one really important tool. And I do think that the importance of them and the ways that they can be impactful get overlooked a lot of times in companies, but many affinity groups are open to anyone. So Mike alluded that you don't have to be a member of the LGBTQ community to join Opal, which is our LGBT resource group. And that's, by definition, what it means to be an ally to any community. So whether it's the LGBTQ community, the Black community, the Asian community is to say here's this group, but it's not exclusive. It's about me joining so that I can understand more about you, more about your culture, more about what you need.

And that's what I think is so important to see that here at Jackson Lewis, even in the six months that I've been here, we have such a great opportunity to learn more about each other through these affinity groups. And because there's so much diversity within the firm, just like there tends to be within any company, when you have that much diversity and that much intersectionality, it is so critical to have resource groups like that, to bring people together, to learn from one another.

Michelle: I don't know what I'm going to do. Tomorrow, I'm traveling to have our partners meeting, which we haven't had for a couple of years and all of the

affinity groups are having these meetings. And I feel like I want to split myself into five or six different parts so I could attend all of them because each one is amazing in its own, right? And just I can't stress that enough how important that is in a company and a firm to be able to have all of these shared experiences. And we come together in good times. We come together in more difficult times, like the Pulse Nightclub situation, but it was such a powerful message. We had like 90 people on a call and everyone was expressing comfort to each other. So there's that side of it and then there's also this, just this possibility for networking, for connecting with like-minded people, for connecting with clients that are like-minded and for articles that we publish we've put out, as Supreme Court decisions have come out and we use the resource groups to make it happen.

Mike, you can attest to that. Sometimes it's that day and you got to get it out, within an hour or two. We're like, "Okay, I'm on board." So there's just so many different possibilities where we get to work together in groups. So I really want to thank the three of you, Angie, Eve, Mike, you're all amazing. It's so great doing this podcast with you. And I'm sure we'll have more opportunities to work together in the future. So thanks again.

Angie: Thank you.

Eve: Thanks Michelle.

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