



Rotman School of Management
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[OUTsider-Within]

Effective LGBTQ2S+ Leadership in Business

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Introduction

Background

As a young member of the LGBTQ2S+ business community, I sat in a roomful of wide-eyed young LGBTQ2S+ students and professionals at the Start Proud Out on Bay Street Conference in 2019. Like many others, I was listening intently to keynote speaker Eric Kuhn--media executive, tech entrepreneur and Broadway producer--share that he had hidden the fact that he was gay for many, many years for fear of being judged. As a gay man living in a straight world, he felt very much like an outsider. His was not an uncommon story among LGBTQ2S+ identifying individuals. His status as an outsider gave him a unique perspective. This perspective led him to think outside-of-the-box and generate innovative and winning entrepreneurial ideas. What was very striking to me was the idea that the experience of being gay somehow contributed to his success.

Outsider and Insider

This idea was novel to me and made me rethink the whole gay experience. I began to research more into this outsider concept, which led me to the sociological relationship and dynamic between the outsider and insider. This outsider-insider perspective seems to have its roots in early writings of German sociologist Georg Simmel. Based on English translations of his work, Georg writes about the ability of the "stranger" to see patterns that may be more difficult for those immersed in the situation to see.¹ Another sociologist Robert Merton

expands on this by highlighting the non-static status of being an insider or an outsider. His research explains this dynamic further in that "In structural terms, we are all, of course, both Insiders and Outsiders, members of some groups and, sometimes derivatively, not of others; occupants of certain statuses which thereby exclude us from occupying other cognate statuses."² He further states that "individuals have not a single status but a status set: a complement of variously interrelated statuses which interact to affect both their behavior and perspectives."³

Outsider-Insider in the LGBTQ2S+ Community

Given this idea of dynamic and multiple statuses, people who identify as homosexuals are therefore not always outsiders in the same way that heterosexuals are not always insiders. In fact, in later queer theory writings such as the *Politics of Inside/Out: Queer Theory, Poststructuralism and a Sociological Approach to Sexuality*, the contention is to re-examine the ways by which the "lesbian and gay difference can be framed only in opposition to the apparent normalcy of heterosexuality"⁴ and instead seeks to address "not only the emergence and development of homosexual communities, but also the intersection of these identities within the broader context of heterosexual hegemony;"⁵ not to mention the existence of a variety of other sexual and gender identities like bisexuals, transgender persons, and non-binary persons. The queer identity must be seen as much more complex and multi-faceted than just a tension between the homosexual (outsider) and heterosexual (insider).

¹ Park, Robert E. *The Sociological Significance of the Stranger* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1921), 322-27.

² Robert K. Merton. "Insiders and Outsiders: A Chapter in the Sociology of Knowledge." *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 78, No. 1 (1972), 22.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2776569>.

³ Robert K. Merton. "Insiders and Outsiders: A Chapter in the Sociology of Knowledge." *American Journal of Sociology*,

Vol. 78, No. 1 (1972), 22.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2776569>.

⁴ Namaste, Ki. "The Politics of Inside/Out: Queer Theory, Poststructuralism, and a Sociological Approach to Sexuality." *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (1994). 228.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/201866>.

⁵ Namaste. "The Politics of Inside/Out." 228.

Outsider-Within

Patricia Hill Collins’ expands the concept of outsider-insider further by defining the concept of being an Outsider-Within. As a black feminist writer, Patricia focuses on black female sociologists in her study and characterizes their experience as outsiders-within who “occupy a special place—they become different people, and their difference sensitizes them to patterns that may be more difficult for established sociological insiders to see.”⁶ She then alludes to various ways by which this status of black female sociologists can be harnessed by conserving “the creative tension of outsider-within status by encouraging and institutionalizing outsider within ways of seeing.”⁷ In the same way, as Western society has increasingly seen more widespread acceptance of LGBTQ2S+ people, who in many ways are now “insiders;” there is a need to encourage and institutionalize their outsider ways of seeing.

Outsider-Within Status for LGBTQ2S+

As I began researching into whether there has been this institutionalization of outsider ways of seeing in the context of LGBTQ2S+ in business, I realized there is some but very little written out there on this topic. Perhaps the closest literature I could find is a book written by Kirk Snyder, a professor at USC Marshall, entitled *The G Quotient: Why Gay Executives Are Excelling as Leaders... and What Every Manager Needs to Know*. Based on a five year multi-study of gay white males, their employees and a sample of straight and non-straight people; the book argues that gay men are the best managers to lead empowered employees and organizations armed with a set of 7 principles.⁸ Another book based on research on a similar subject is *Pride*

Leadership: Strategies for the LGBTQ2S+ Leader to be the King or Queen of their Jungle by Dr. Steve Yacovelli. As an experienced diversity leadership trainer, he identifies six leadership competencies displayed by LGBTQ2S+ people and focuses on how readers can apply pride leadership strategies in their personal lives. See Chart 1 below for a list of these principles and competencies.⁹

Chart 1: G Quotient Principles vs. Pride Leadership Competencies

G Quotient Principles	Pride Leadership Competencies
Inclusion	Having Authenticity
Creativity	Leadership Courage
Adaptability	Leveraging Empathy
Connectivity	Effective
Communication	Communication
Intuition	Building Relationships
Collaboration	Shaping Culture

I thoroughly agree with the business and historical context provided in Snyder’s book that speaks to why gay executives are in the right place at the right time. First, increasingly, employees are no longer satisfied with just getting a paycheck and now care more about engagement and purpose in their work lives. Second, gay men have developed learned skills like adaptability, intuition and problem-solving (see Chart 2) as a result of their gay-specific experiences like having to engage in social scanning, coming out and essentially navigating a world built for straight people. Lastly, the business case for diversity has time and again proven that cognitively diverse organizations perform better (among many metrics)¹⁰ over

⁶ Collins, Patricia Hill. “Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought.” *Social Problems*, Vol. 33, No. 6, Special Theory Issue (1986), S29.

⁷ Collins, Patricia Hill. “Learning from the Outsider Within.” S29.

⁸ Syner, Kirk. *G Quotient: Why Gay Executive are Excelling as Leaders...And What Every Manager Needs to Know* (San Francisco, CA, Jossey-Bass, 2006), Introduction.

⁹ Yacovelli, Steve. *Pride Leadership: Strategies for the LGBTQ+ Leader to be the King or Queen of Their Jungle*. (Hartford CT, Publish Your Purpose Press 2019), Chapt.1.

¹⁰ Reynolds, Alison & Lewis David. “Teams Solve Problems Faster When They’re More Cognitively Diverse” Harvard

homogenous organizations that are more subject to groupthink. All in all, Snyder argues that gay men are very much equipped to become excellent leaders to lead empowered workforces in diverse environments. In fact, his study concludes that workplaces with gay managers report 35% higher levels of employee engagement, satisfaction and morale.¹¹

Chart 2: Mapping Gay Experiences to Gay Learned Skills (Kirk Snyder)¹²

Gay Experiences	Learned Skills
Outsider	Value on the Individual
Surviving in a straight world	Adaptability
Social scanning	Intuitive communication
Coming out	Problem solving

Chart 3: Outsider-Within Hypothesis Qualities

Outsider-Within Qualities
Overcompensation
Resilience
Outsider/Diverse Perspective
Social Perceptiveness

Purpose

Armed with the hypothesis from Snyder's second argument on the value of the learned skills of gay men along with scholarly articles on related topics, I sought to explore my own selected hypothesis leadership qualities (see Chart 3 above) by exploring the experiences of

LGBTQ2S+ identifying business leaders in Toronto. I asked these accomplished business leaders for their perspective on LGBTQ2S+ leadership and more specifically, what drove them to succeed in their respective fields in business. Putting my LGBTQ2S+ hat on, my objective was to answer this overarching question: Did their experience as an LGBTQ2S+ identifying person contribute specifically to the success they are experiencing today?

Expanding further on that main question, I asked them the following questions among others, as applied to their different situations

- How does being an outsider manifest in the everyday challenges and successes of your life as an LGBTQ2S+ leader in business in Toronto today?
- What leadership skills and business skills have been developed in your experience as an LGBTQ2S+ person?
- What were the elements that were fundamental to your success?
- What were some of the obstacles and barriers to your success, if any?

Going back to Patricia Hill Collins' concept of the outsider-within, I sought to apply her suggested improvements in the study of black female sociologists to my presentation of LGBTQ2S+ leaders in business. In an effort to "counter this invisibility by presenting sociological analysis of Black women as fully human subjects"¹³ I have interviewed eight LGBTQ2S+ leaders who will be examining their own "self-definitions and self-valuations."¹⁴ By offering their own personal and cultural biographies in what Hill Collins terms as "experienced reality," this has proved to be a valuable and significant wealth of experiences to draw from in validating my set of hypothesis qualities (Chart 3).

Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2017/03/teams-solve-problems-faster-when-theyre-more-cognitively-diverse> (retrieved March 2020).

¹¹ Snyder, Kirk. "Bringing the Outsiders In." The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2006/sep/09/gayfinance.careers> (Retrieved March 2020).

¹² Syner, Kirk. G Quotient: Why Gay Executive are Excelling as Leaders...And What Every Manager Needs to Know (San Francisco, CA, Jossey-Bass, 2006), Introduction.

¹³ Collins, Patricia Hill. "Learning from the Outsider Within." S28.

¹⁴ Collins, Patricia Hill. "Learning from the Outsider Within." S28.

Furthermore, I will investigate how these LGBTQ2S+ leaders' gender expression, gender identity, economic, cultural, religious, family, workplace experiences, among other intersectionalities interplay with their sexual identity. As Hill Collins sought to dispel erroneous explanations of black female poverty as stemming from low motivation and the lack of human capital, I seek to familiarize myself with the highly-motivated and highly successful LGBTQ2S+ human capital in Toronto as a means to dispel stereotypes and present role models for the LGBTQ2S+ community. Through the lived experiences of these LGBTQ2S+ leaders, my hope is to promote LGBTQ2S+ gender discourse and inspire younger LGBTQ2S+ generations.

“Outsiders within occupy a special place—they become different people, and their difference sensitizes them to patterns that may be more difficult for established sociological insiders to see.” – Patricia Hill Collins

Methodology and Limitations

In order to have an objective measure of “success” in the Toronto LGBTQ2S+ business context, the study was targeted towards LGBTQ2S+ leaders who are recognized for their leadership and societal contributions.

The interview questions were qualitative and touched on topics like early life, coming out, career, cultural, and community service experiences. The interviewee had the freedom to select topics to be included and excluded in the discussion. The interview duration depended on the interview’s preference and took anywhere between 30 minutes to 2 hours, conducted in

person or through a video or audio call application.

I interviewed eight LGBTQ2S+ leaders who are accomplished business leaders in their own right. As the sampling process was dependent on voluntary self-selection to be part of this study, there was little control over the sampling. As can be seen in the Appendix Table A – Interviewer Demographic Data, there were three times more female-identifying interviewees over males. There were seven cisgender persons and one transgender person whereas none had identified themselves as non-binary or two-spirited or other gender identities. Seven out of eight interviewees were white while only one was a person-of-color. There is an absence of perspectives from QTBIPOC (queer and trans black, indigenous, people of color) and particularly, racialized women. The industries represented by the interviewees were limited to finance, technology, film and media and law.

What follows are the key themes and insights from my data-gathering and analysis process.

Self-Validation and Overcoming Deficit

In a book published by Dr. Alan Downs entitled *The Velvet Rage*, he explores how “growing up gay in a straight world”¹⁵ results to the internalization of shame, rejection, and anger. While Downs’ book does touch on how gay men try to make up for this deficit by being successful at what they do; he also focuses more on the negative outcomes from this lack of self-worth like addictions or other types of dysfunctional overcompensating behaviours. My discussion with LGBTQ2S+ leaders centers more around what effect this need to self-validate had on their careers.

¹⁵ Downs, Alan. *The Velvet Rage: Overcoming the Pain of Growing Up Gay in a Straight Man’s World*. (Boston, MA, Da Capo Lifelong Books, 2005).

Overcoming Deficit vs Overachievement

Sonny, one of the interviewees, referred to the fact that as an LGBTQ2S+ person, one indeed has to “work harder than others. You got to prove yourself because you are just not part of the crowd.” Leaders like Sonny are naturally driven, ambitious and hardworking; all of which have contributed to their success. Even so, there remains a feeling of trying to overcome a deficit. Cristina, another interviewee, agrees and thinks that LGBTQ2S+ people are naturally faced with more adversity and must persevere and strive for more. On the flipside, this deficit mindset also manifests as self-doubt, as another interviewee Martha describes: the “Did I get my job because I’m the best” question is only “something you wonder if you’re acutely aware of your otherness already. Something you wonder if you’re a woman, if you’re a person of color, if you’re LGBTQ or if you’re diverse...this is something that you would only consider if you’re already part of a different community or experienced a sense of loneliness.”

A majority of the LGBTQ2S+ leaders however could not point to their LGBTQ2S+ experience as being the single driver of success. While it may have an indirect influence in their psyche, some like interviewees Hannah and Melissa characterize themselves as overachievers already with a drive to succeed since they were young. Perhaps other psychosocial factors are at play.

“You have got to, work harder than others, you got to prove yourself more because you don’t, you’re not part of the crowd. You’re not you know, you’re on the out, right?” -Sonny

Family Upbringing

Martha’s mother was a TV executive and the breadwinner of the family. Martha thus grew up believing that she could do anything as long as she worked hard. For her, “I think being raised by a brave, passionate, funny, talented woman

has had a huge impact on me.” Overwhelmingly, the LGBTQ2S+ leaders I interviewed point to their upbringing as a major contributor to their success in life. Some pointed to a loving family environment that taught them to treat other people with respect and kindness. Even though others grew up with single parents or in less ideal economic conditions like Cristina for example, they were even more motivated to succeed. Generally, their parents were focused on encouraging hard work and impressing upon them the importance of a good education.

“I didn’t grow up surrounded by a bias that men should be the breadwinner. In fact, it was my father, who looked after my brother and I while my mother went out to work. And that was a very important early life lesson, I think, because I was nurtured and encouraged to believe that I could do anything I wanted to as long as I worked hard” - Martha

Going Against the Norm vs. Self-Acceptance

Many of the LGBTQ2S+ leaders I interviewed, especially the older ones, struggled more with the idea of going against the norm and dealing with self-acceptance as they were becoming more aware of their homosexuality when they were growing up. Melissa, who was a top student and athlete of the year described her experience of feeling like this isn’t supposed to be me as “I fought, being gay, as hard as anybody could fight. Like, I did not want to be gay.” Even telling their peers or friends was a difficult experience as Sonny recalled: “there’s a whole bunch of people who sort of either pity on you or wish you would come back into the fold.” As a result, some struggled with self-acceptance and the emotional challenges that came along with it.

Interestingly enough, one interviewee Sam pointed out that she struggled to live with the experience of being LGBTQ2S+ and living with these “demons” so to speak. She poured herself into her work as a lawyer to moderate the effect

of these demons. Working very hard was a very “productive coping mechanism” and so she partly attributes her success to this coping strategy.

Moving beyond self-acceptance to broader societal acceptance, when asked about whether they were comfortable in going against the norm and against everyone else’s expectations, it was easy for Cristina and Sonny. Cristina felt that we are lucky enough to live in the Western World where “being different is never a bad thing” and “difference is good in the world...it differentiates you.” Sonny also did not appear uncomfortable going against society’s norms because in his words, “I don’t require a lot of people around me to validate what I am.” For Hannah, it took some time for her to grow more comfortable with going against the norm, which happened when she became older and more confident about who she is.

Family Acceptance

Perhaps much of the LGBTQ2S+ person’s stress over acceptance comes not from the self or society but from the fear of disappointing one’s parents and other family members. As Sonny describes, “And when it’s the people who are supposed to love you unconditionally, who wish that (you’re not gay) because even if their motive is - I don’t want any harm to come to you - that’s hurtful because it says, you have less right to be who you are. Even if their instinct is protective, it’s sending a message.” Although Martha had a good experience coming out to a parent who already suspected before she did, the vast majority had a difficult dynamic with parents who struggled to accept their children’s sexual orientation.

“And when it’s the people who are supposed to love you unconditionally, who wish that because even if their motive is - I don’t want any harm to come to you - That’s hurtful. Because it says, you have less right to be who you are. Even if their instinct is protective, it’s sending a message” - Sonny

A parent’s protective message often stemmed from concerns about their LGBTQ2S+ child’s career prospects and their ability to be happy. Some LGBTQ2S+ leaders sadly described their experience coming out to a parent as difficult, with that parent even wanting to hide this piece of information from the rest of the family. This protective instinct somehow weakens when the parent finds out that their child has found a suitable long-term partner. Carla, an interviewee, recalled her mother saying about her partner, “This is a person who really loves you...and that was what prompted her (the mother) to kind of come out to her sisters and the rest of the family.” Having a stable and long-term partner was a common “requirement” before coming out to the rest of the family was allowed by a parent.

Three of the interviewees had singled out an interesting phenomenon when coming out to their grandparents. Initially, their parents had delayed the revelation of this information to their grandparents thinking that they are older, lived in a more conservative time and thus, would have a harder time accepting it. When the right time came for their grandparents to know, they were very accepting and wondered what took their grandchildren so long to come out to them. In order to explain this sort of incongruity, Carla theorizes that perhaps “grandparents kind of let them (grandchildren) love who they want to love because they know life is short. And that it’s not a fight worth having.”

Resilience and Bravery

Resilience

Having to deal with an identity crisis and navigating hostile social environments earlier in life, it is often viewed by many that LGBTQ2S+ people are very resilient. In the popular podcast Out and Up by Drake Andrews, he likens solving his big problem of coming out and telling friends and family that he is gay to a great business solving a problem. He focuses on entrepreneurship specifically because “similar to coming out, you need to be vulnerable, resilient, and daring. It allows you to handpick the people and space around you, giving you the power to tell your story and be your own boss.”¹⁶ This adaptability is also confirmed by an article that features Joel Simkhai, founder and CEO of the gay social network Grindr who explains “as a gay person, you’re by definition a minority and somewhat outside straight society. That makes me think differently, do things differently, and I think that’s helped me in business.”¹⁷

““Having to grapple with who you are, what that means for me and my place in this world.” - Hannah

Indeed, for Hannah, one of the LGBTQ2S+ leaders I interviewed, resilience is developed when you are “having to grapple with who you are, what that means for me and my place in this world.” When LGBTQ2S+ people are more prone to bullying during their younger years, they must build protective walls, and this builds resilience. As Cristina describes, “it’s not about how often you get knocked down but how much you get back up. Every time you hear a comment, keep moving.” Hannah furthers the

¹⁶ Andrews, Drake. “About.” Out and Up. <https://outandup.co/pages/a-good-business-solves-a-problem> (retrieved March 2020).

¹⁷ Lapowsky, Issie. “Are Gay People Better Entrepreneurs?” INC. <https://www.inc.com/issie-lapowsky/gay-people-make-better-entrepreneurs.html> (retrieved March 2020).

discussion by comparing her experience to that of heterosexuals where “coming from a place of difference builds a level of resilience that maybe I wouldn’t have if I were an affluent white male.”

Bravery and Strength

Looking back at the history of the LGBTQ2S+ community and everything that the community has been through from the Stonewall Rebellion all the way to the AIDS movement and the push for marriage equality; it cannot be denied how much bravery and strength the community has shown in the face of opposition and adversity. In an article written about the implications of the coming out movement by sociologist Abigail Saguy, “by presenting coming out as a way to end internalized self-hatred and achieve a better life, the LGBTQ2S+ movement helped to encourage people to come out, despite associated risks. It also showed how coming out could be used to build solidarity and recruit other queer people.”¹⁸

“The bravest people you will ever meet are the people prepared to go into the world proclaiming their gayness. But to be brave, is to make the decision to be different...and to be proud of it, and to be prepared to deal with what that means—Right, which often is, you will be treated differently.” - Martha

At an individual level, having gone through the struggle of self-acceptance and coming out, Melissa recounts that “from leaving all my friends, everyone to move to Toronto to figure this out, means that I am strong and I am resilient...and these are all really awesome things and I’ve forgotten that I went through all that.” This is confirmed by Carla as she also expands on the complication of family

¹⁸ Saguy, Abigail “The History Of ‘Coming Out,’ From Secret Gay Code To Popular Political Protest.” History New Network. <http://hnn.us/article/174257> (retrieved March 2020).

acceptance in developing the qualities of “courage and bravery, shown in particular by people who had to confront that idea with their own families and the potential rejection of what’s supposed to be the safest space on earth for you.”

Martha explores the reason behind this unbeknownst bravery further in that “the bravest people you will ever meet are the people prepared to go into the world proclaiming their gayness. But to be brave, is to make the decision to be different. And to be proud of it, and to be prepared to deal with what that means—Right, which often is, you will be treated differently.” Cristina expands on the amount of bravery necessary at an everyday level when you are faced with coming out every day and “forced to make those choices...constantly faced with making choices in day to day interactions...forces you to reveal a certain part of you. Forced to decide.” Carla unpacks what this means for LGBTQ2S+’s value in business by pointing out that “you actually have a secret weapon. You have an asset. You have something called bravery and a willingness to speak and find your voice, which in business is so valuable.”

Shared Identity

Community

As members of a diverse community, LGBTQ2S+ people are grouped into “the letters” because of our shared identity and common experiences. Martha felt lucky to grow up around friends of her parents who were creatives and who were openly lesbian and gay. Melissa, on the other hand, who struggled with self-acceptance, did not feel connected to the community in the beginning because as someone who passed as straight, she did not see herself represented in popular gay culture and in people walking around Church street. She says “I just didn’t see...I didn’t see me. That also compounded my worry or stress that I wasn’t a

part of that community either. So, I think I was very lost for a little while.” Thankfully now she has good people from the LGBTQ2S+ community in her life. We feel the need to connect with people who are like us because as Carla puts it, we are “constantly coming out, figuring out roles...we need a supportive community to support our journey.” On a more intimate level, Carla also recognizes that we need to “share our experiences with intimate relationships and (our) fear. I think fear is ubiquitous in the LGBTQ2S+ community.”

“Constantly coming out, figuring out roles...we need a supportive community to support our journey” - Carla

Fortunately, Hannah has the opportunity to volunteer for a prominent LGBTQ2S+ organization in Toronto. She sees the organization as a “meaningful space to gather with other queer people and not be afraid...to ensure as many people in community are given the chance, services, to survive and thrive.” What happens when you cannot find the communities you can relate with? Martha says “you have to create them” as she herself did when she created an industry-focused queer community in every country she has lived in.

Others like Carla, Sam and Cristina donate their time to the community through mentoring LGBTQ2S+ people inside and outside their workplace. Carla and Sam, who are more senior in their careers, provide financial support to foundations like the 519 and the Stephen Lewis foundation. Talking about the importance of supporting even international communities, Carla cares about supporting “international work around creating safe havens and places of refuge for people who...it’s still illegal. They’re persecuted.”

Visibility and Voice

In *Sister Outsider*, a compilation of essays written by black lesbian feminist Audre Lorde, she writes "the transformation of silence into language and action is a self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger."¹⁹ She counters this predisposition towards silence by stating that "People are taught to respect their fear of speaking more than silence, but ultimately, the silence will choke us anyway, so we might as well speak the truth."²⁰

"It's become more important to me to ensure that people know I'm a lesbian and not to diminish it or contextualize or put it in perspective and just sort of make it a statement of pride." - Carla

Visibility is as important as having a voice and speaking the truth. Sonny puts forward the importance of having visibility as the head of the LGBTQ2S+ committee in his company because in his own words, "if you can be visible then it matters because we know role models matter. We know that standing up and being counted matters, that having a voice matters, that being seen matters, all those things." Representation is championed even more by very senior leaders like Carla who thinks "it has become more important to me to recognize that because I have had leadership roles and profiles and have had a voice in different conversations in different places and sometimes important places...It's become more important to me to ensure that people know I'm lesbian and not to diminish it, or contextualize or put it in perspective and just sort of make it a statement of pride."

It is important for these leaders to have visibility, whether its representation in their chosen career path or using their voice to create safer spaces and environments for fellow queer people.

¹⁹ Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider : Essays and Speeches*. (Trumansburg NY, Crossing Press, 1984) 42.

Martha has used her voice in her organization to push for gender neutral bathrooms. Melissa notes though that visibility in her organization was much easier to do when she achieved a certain seniority level. For another interviewee Ahmed, the lack of seniority did not stop him. Visibility for him translates into being a visible person of color and gay man and making himself available for younger LGBTQ2S+ persons in and around his organization to connect with.

Position of Privilege vs Responsibility

There was a fair amount of agreement amongst these leaders on the privilege that they had and the corresponding responsibility that came along with it. Most felt privileged that they lived in Canada and that they were afforded the equal civil rights as LGBTQ2S+ people. They felt quite fortunate to have been given opportunities to pursue their ambitions with less barriers. Melissa explains that "we also have to acknowledge that we have a responsibility as leaders to help lift up those that are coming behind us and those that are not in the same situation and do not have access to the same privilege that we have." Even towards more marginalized members in the LGBTQ2S+ community such as the trans community, Carla feels that it is "part of our job to make our arms bigger and make our tent as big as it can be and embrace that community as everybody should. I do feel a special obligation because of being gay."

"We also have to acknowledge that we have a responsibility as leaders to help lift up those that are coming behind us and those that are not in the same situation and do not have access to the same privilege that we have." - Melissa

Martha and Hannah feel very strongly about women in their industries and queer women in

²⁰ Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider*. 44.

particular. Martha feels very responsible to lift fellow women up in her industry. She explains “because if you have the ability, you know, by what rights should you not do it? I just think you have a responsibility.” Hannah feels very strongly about the absence of queer women in politics and wanted to make sure that “I used the position that I have... to speak, to be visible. So that the next generation of folks growing up and thinking about their sexuality are seeing examples of people who can achieve things in various fields.”

Outsider and Insider

In a study of trans men that uses the outsider-within concept, Kristen Schilt found that because they were male-presenting, trans men had experienced increased authority, reward and recognition in their organization. Trans men are in the unique position of having been socially gendered as both women and men.²¹ As former outsiders (female) who are now insiders (male), they understand how it feels like to be a former outsider and thus “translate their position as social insiders into an educational role, working to give women more rewards and recognition.”²² This is a unique application of the outsider-within perspective to the LGBTQ2S+ community where now the outsider-within is in a position to help othered outsiders.

“Am I prepared to change my behaviors to suit the other one? I do not assume that the world works for me. Because I am aware it doesn't.” - Martha

Insider Privilege vs Outsider Oppression and Otherness

Even as the interviewees felt they are in positions of privilege, there was a general feeling of being an outsider and an outsider-within in their lives. As the only queer person in their workplace or in their level of seniority, the feeling of being different is still apparent with Sonny recognizing that “my lived experience is different.” Carla believes that this stems from a feeling that “whenever you come from a place of difference or marginalization, you kind of have to find your way and you can't force people to take a certain path with things that are intimate and personal about who you are.” Martha, who went to a conservative high school and struggled working with men in her field thinks that the constant question queer people are faced with in the workplace is: “am I prepared to change my behaviors to suit the other one? I do not assume that the world works for me because I am aware it doesn't.”

Two interviewees, Melissa and Hannah, are quick to note that although they felt like outsiders, they knew they had fewer difficulties compared to the rest of the LGBTQ2S+ community because they were straight-presenting. Having one foot in the door as a privileged white woman and one foot outside as a queer woman helped them understand the outsider's perspective even more. When parts of their identity had awarded them an insider status, they still maintained their outsider perspective, and this changed their view of the world and their behaviours accordingly.

Coming from a Place of Difference Towards a More Diverse Perspective

Carla led widespread diversity and inclusion work in her organization. She knew that if she

²¹ Dozier, Raine. “Beards, breasts, and bodies: Doing Sex In A Gendered World.” *Gender & Society* 19. 297-316.

²² Schilt, Kristen. Just One of the Guys? How Transmen

Make Gender Visible at Work.” *Gender and Society*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (2006). 487. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27640905>.

did not transform her company culturally into a more inclusive and reflective organization; in her own words, it would eventually be irrelevant. As a leader with a strong voice in her organization, she was more effective in her D&I work having similarly come from a place of difference. For her, “because I was a person who again came from an understanding of what it was to be marginalized, I think it gave me a kind of special credibility.” Ahmed, who specifically does diversity and inclusion work for his firm, expands his coming from place of difference beyond sexual orientation to include his ethnicity. He feels that he is able to “bring to the table different views and different perspectives, not just from myself, but from the people I’ve encountered and people from the community as well.” He brings facets of his self that are not traditionally seen in the law industry. Working with clients, this brings an “additional layer of diversity” and helps the firm “think about things innovatively.” He helped develop a sexual orientation and gender identity policy and procedure at his global firm which includes benefits and community-building activities for the LGBTQ2S+ community.

At an organizational level, Sonny completely believes in the concept of diversity because “if you get a diverse group of people together, you get a better outcome.” Coming from a place of difference, Martha believes she is “far more prepared to see the value, the benefit of the impact of people who are also...(gay) or deaf. In terms of how she makes hiring decisions in the film industry, “by hiring people who can bring their whole selves to work and are as diverse as possible, we achieve the most diverse and creative work than if you hire white men to do your creative work.” As a senior Talent professional in her organization, Cristina believes her diverse perspective has empowered her to be a better leader. She is able to identify with people in her organization and connect with them better.

“Bring to the table different views and different perspectives, not just from me, but from the people I’ve encountered and people from the community as well.” -Ahmed

Challenging the Status Quo and Truth Telling

When asked how they felt about going against the norm, most of the LGBTQ2S+ leaders interviewed do not feel any need to conform to society’s expectations. In fact, as result of feeling like an outsider and being accorded an outsider-within status, they have a heightened sense of challenging the status quo. As Carla describes, “it comes very naturally to you if you’ve already identified as an outsider...it doesn’t feel weird to be the person who has the different viewpoints.” Sonny feels that as an outsider, he feels like he has “less to lose...this concept of speaking truth to power” even though he attributes some of this to his personality type of not easily being affected by what anyone else thinks. He describes his experience in more detail as “a growing militancy as I get older because I see more and more examples of things that just are not working the way they should be...And so I’m finding myself speaking up more, pointing these things out and just not accepting the status quo.”

Carla believes in the importance of this quality for a business leader who has “to be able to speak up about anything, to be able to challenge the status quo, to say have we thought about this enough, to have that bravery as part of your DNA and something you have a comfort level with—I think is a huge asset in business.” Beyond challenging the status quo, the skill of truth telling is also valuable in an organization. Carla has often found herself in poorly performing business situations that called for a strategic transformation. She has rallied executives to face the truth about their company’s situation and to make difficult choices. As an accomplished transformation leader, Carla describes her resolve as “I have been the one person to tell the truth. It has

always been important to me. I'm sure it was partly a subconscious response to being closeted. Knowing that the truth mattered. Somebody had to say it eventually." As a result of communicating in an authentic and truthful manner, people around her found her credible and listened to her. She was more effective as a transformational leader because she was committed to truth telling.

"You use your EQ to read every environment. And you have to because these environments are not built for you. They're built for white male privilege." -Martha

Social Scanning vs Social Perceptiveness

Social perceptiveness captures a person's sensitivity and responsiveness to social and interpersonal cues about appropriate behaviours in a situation.²³ According to a recent study, gay and lesbian participants reported significantly higher levels of social perceptiveness compared with heterosexual respondents.²⁴ This is supported by research that suggests that "daily experiences of people with concealable stigmas are often structured by decisions about whether to conceal or disclose."²⁵ In order to make this decision, "individuals with a concealable status may protect themselves by closely attending to social interactions...monitoring the actions and discerning the potential perspectives of interactive partners."²⁶

Social perceptiveness appears to be an additional skill developed by LGBTQ2S+ folks from reading social situations we find ourselves in and from constantly scanning the environment

to determine who we can trust. This ties into building protective walls and developing strength and resilience as a result as Sonny affirms, "you're constantly looking for the affirmation and assurance it's a safe environment." As Martha further explains, "you use your EQ to read every environment. And you have to because these environments are not built for you. They're built for white male privilege." For Cristina who works in Talent, this high EQ and ability to read people emotionally, serves as an advantage in her career; especially in HR where she works with people, hires people and mitigates people issues. Her job is basically "people in different capacities" and thus, social perceptiveness is a valuable skill.

Being LGBTQ2S+ in the Workplace

What was very common across the leaders I interviewed is the growth mindset they had for themselves and for the organizations they worked in. Sonny loves interesting work and loves when things are growing. He says, "I like to grow a company. I like to make money. I think the process of business is interesting." What Sam loves about the idea of practicing law is the power to make things better. Martha characterizes herself as very curious and always learning from every experience even if it is hard. She is most likely to move her career to a different location when she finds that she wants to learn something different and make a greater impact.

²³ Mehra, A., M. J. Kilduff, and D. J. Brass. "The Social Networks Of High And Low Self-Monitors: Implications For Workplace Performance." *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 46: 121-146.

²⁴ Tilcsik, Antebly, Knight. "Concealable Stigma and Occupational Segregation: Toward a Theory of Gay and Lesbian Occupations." *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (September 2015) 460. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43546691>.

²⁵ Sedlovskaya, A., V. Purdie-Vaughns, R. P. Eibach, M. LaFrance, R. Romero-Canyas, and N. P. Camp. "Internalizing the Closet: Concealment Heightens the Cognitive Distinction Between Public and Private Selves." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 104: 695-715.

²⁶ Pachankis, J. E.

"The Psychological Implications of Concealing a Stigma: A Cognitive-Affective Behavioural Model." *Psychological Bulletin*, 133 (2). 333.

Workplace Environment and Support

The workplace environment was singled out as playing a big role in supporting the career and coming out of these LGBTQ2S+ leaders. For someone like Carla, who has reached the highest levels in Canadian business, cultural fit was important. She moved from a comfortable Finance job to a smaller company that was “somewhere where it looks and feels like me.” For Melissa, Sonny, Carla, and Sam who took some time before they were comfortable in coming out at work; they were met with the support of their company and their peers. Sonny works in financial services and spent 14 years in the closet as he saw more downsides than upsides at that time to coming out at work. As a senior leader now, he leads LGBTQ2S+ diversity initiatives in his organization because he believes that “When you bring your whole self to work, your best self to work, it feels better. You're a better worker, which is why I'd be a big advocate for that. We've got to create a safe environment where people will do that. They have got to bring their best selves work because it's not fair to them. I think we're robbing them of their full potential.”

“We've got to create a safe environment where people will do that. They have got to bring their best selves work because it's not fair to them...I think we're robbing them of their full potential.”-Sonny

Coming Out

Coming out at work is a common and major struggle among LGBTQ2S+ leaders early in their careers. Understandably, people from an older generation and who worked in more traditionally conservative industries took more time before they allowed themselves to come

out. However, according to a study done by Out Now and Vodafone in 2018, 41% of younger students go back into the closet upon entering the workforce. When faced with an entirely new environment that requires adjustment, younger LGBTQ2S+ in the study feared negative repercussions from coming out like: “worrying that colleagues will react negatively (60%); fearing their career prospects will be worse (42%); and feeling they will be less likely to get promoted (33%).”²⁷ As a result, nearly one third (28%) felt that this had led to lower productivity levels in their workplace.

Cristina was more strategic in coming out when she worked as consultant, only being out to her colleagues but not to her clients. She was working with conservative financial services clients and was not married to a woman yet back then. She felt disadvantaged and worked in what she perceived to be homophobic environments. She did not have the emotional energy to be out to her clients and even felt a certain relief to be closeted. This experience developed a certain amount of resilience in her by training her to not get distracted by other people because she was, indeed, not responsible for their emotions. For Carla, as she became more senior in her organization, the impetus to come out became stronger. She just felt “less and less comfortable lying...the constant sins of omission of what did you do this weekend and all that careful language that you engage in and all that sort of code switching and neutralizing pronouns.” This constant fear of being outed or coming out is indeed exhausting. Sonny explains how coming out at work actually benefits the business. He describes his experience of being closeted before as very exhausting. He explains “I didn't know how exhausting it was until you don't do it anymore...And so then, all that exhaustion and energy, emotional energy actually can be redirected somewhere else. I think that's the

²⁷ Press Office. “41% of LGBT+ people go 'back in the closet' in first job, independent multi-industry study across 15 countries finds.” Vodafone UK News Centre.

<https://newscentre.vodafone.co.uk/press-release/lgbt-plus-survey/> (retrieved March 2020).

beauty of it (coming out). You're actually becoming a more effective, better human being.”

“I didn't know how exhausting it was until you don't do it anymore...And so then, all that exhaustion and energy, emotional energy actually can be redirected somewhere else. I think that's the beauty of it (coming out). You're actually becoming a more effective, better human being.” -Sonny

Although her organization was very LGBTQ2S+ supportive, Melissa only felt the need to come out in her organization because she and her wife were having a baby. Even after coming out, Melissa felt that her fellow senior leaders did not quite get “the whole gay thing” but they were acting like they did. Coming out to her team was a more positive experience as this made them more comfortable in also sharing about their own personal lives. Hannah compared her experience as a young closeted girl to her experience now being out in a law firm. Being closeted “affects your confidence, that you have to hide something or be judged. (It) impacts your ability to bring your whole self...fearful, and that is going to impact your ability in a team.” In her firm now, she is very clear about who she is, and she is confident, feeling like she is able to flourish in her workplace. Beyond her workplace, her sense of self and acceptance of her identity has made her more confident and committed to causes important to her like fighting violence against women. After coming out fully, she knows she is a more effective leader than she might have otherwise been had she remained closeted.

Vulnerability and Authenticity

Vulnerability and Empathy in Leadership

Author and researcher Brene Brown has written and spoken on the power of vulnerability²⁸ and humanity in effective leadership. Melissa mentions being inspired by the author as she values humanity and connection and considers vulnerability as a valuable leadership skill when working with other people in a team. For Martha, being vulnerable to yourself is also important by admitting that “to be the best means you've made loads of mistakes. The most valuable lessons you can learn are those that come from the hardest of situations.”

In the workplace setting, leading with vulnerability for Cristina means opening doors to having meaningful conversations and building other people's comfort. She has observed how vulnerable leadership has impacted her workplace—employees are more dedicated and more loyal, and the retention rate is higher.

Related to one's own vulnerability is the heightened ability to feel empathy. As Columbia University professor and leadership researcher Simon Sinek describes, “Empathy is the most important instrument in a leader's toolbox”.²⁹ Coming from a place of difference and knowing how people who are different feel like has made Sonny always cheer for the underdog. He goes out of his way to talk to shy people in his organization and that orientation is directly motivated by his experience as an outsider. Cristina attributes her effectivity as a business leader to being less emotional and not bringing elements of her personal life to work which

²⁸ Brown, Brene, “The Power of Vulnerability,” June 2010, TED Talk Video, 20:04, https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability?utm_campaign=tedsread&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=tedcomshare (Accessed March 2020).

²⁹ Johnson, Todd, “The Empathy Problem: Mistaking a Rare Talent for a Business Necessity,” Gallup. <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/258041/empathy-problem-mistaking-rare-talent-business-necessity.aspx> (Retrieved March 2020).

results to more focus and productivity. Martha has a different viewpoint and considers herself as a highly emotional individual whose feelings guide her very heavily in my decision making. She is quick to clarify “but I am very good at controlling and using them only in certain circumstances.” As a queer person, Hannah believes she has a heightened sense of empathy in understanding the barriers members of other marginalized communities face. In her line of work as a lawyer, she strives to be an ally and advocate for these communities.

“To be the best means you’ve made loads of mistakes. The most valuable lessons you can learn are those that come from the hardest of situations. -Martha

Authenticity and Inspiration

Authenticity, for LGBTQ2S+ leaders, stems from coming to terms with who you are and finding your own voice to tell your story. Carla notes that her “ability to feel empathy for people is very much an advantage as a leader in business and as a person who can communicate authentically with people who have felt othered ...from a place of knowingness.” Carla seeks to reframe this mindset about queerness towards being something positive that should not be hidden or considered something to be ashamed of. She sees her being queer as one of her positive attributes and part of what led her to career success. She considers her queerness as “one of the attributes that I have had that I have benefited from, in terms of my ability to relate to people...my ability to lead with courage, to achieve things, to conquer my fear. And I think a lot of people don’t have that.”

As leaders who have come to terms with who they are and their authentic selves, they now look outward to help people who may not be in a similar position. Ahmed’s main motivation in his diversity and inclusion work is to make sure other people do not experience what he had experienced before as he was struggling to

come out. He is motivated by the direct impact his D&I work is making to the lives of LGBTQ2S+ employees in his firm who are now much more comfortable in coming out. Cristina tends to over-index her time on tasks like mentoring and coaching emerging leaders in the technology space as an active resource person in Lesbians Who Tech and Venture Out. Her goal is to help younger technology professionals and see their careers grow. She would be satisfied with just changing one person’s life versus other more grandiose or large-scale gestures.

Martha is inspired by the kindness of other people and her own values position as she pushes for more female hiring and promotion at senior levels in her film company. For her, its “important to lift people up and to give them an opportunity... that I maximize my impact and give people as many opportunities as possible. That’s far more interesting to me than you know how much money I earned.” Hannah makes time to work on pro bono legal cases to help people who have limited financial means or access to legal help. She hopes her work will inspire younger members of the community and younger women in particular. She hopes to be a role model in the legal profession and as an example for how to incorporate what you are passionate about into your career.

“Ability to feel empathy for people is very much an advantage as a leader in business and as a person who can communicate authentically with people who have felt othered ...from a place of knowingness.” - Carla

Intersectionality

An individual’s LGBTQ2S+ identity intersects with a diverse multiplicity of other aspects of one’s identity. These common themes of intersectionality experienced by these LGBTQ2S+ leaders highlight indeed how multi-

faceted, multi-staged and multi-status the experience of being an outsider-within in the LGBTQ2S+ community is.

Gender

In another essay by Audre Lorde in *Sister Outsider* entitled *Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference*, she talks about the future survival of women being predicated upon our ability to relate within equality. She writes that “now we must recognize differences among women who are our equals, neither inferior nor superior, and devise ways to use each other’s difference to enrich our visions and our joint struggles.”³⁰ For Melissa and Hannah, they feel the responsibility to make space for queer women in their organizations. Melissa acknowledges that she is a lesbian, but she is also a woman and it is not all about straight white women in her tech organization. She highlights the need for queer role models in her organization especially in the top ranks.

In Carla’s experience, being a lesbian was an advantage among her peers because she was perceived to be neutral. She had a high comfort level in dealing with men because there was no sexual tension. She explains, “I’m not afraid of voicing my opinion in a way that’s unappealing to men unlike straight women who are often deferential.” She describes this sort of “hetero normative overlay as liberating” in the sense that she could define exactly the type of woman she wanted to be. Martha felt female stereotypes were still common in the workplace when she was often told not get upset as opposed to getting angry had she been male.

Gender Expression

Passing off as straight was frequently highlighted as an experience of frustration as well as of privilege. The “do you have a husband” question often comes up for Melissa and a few others as a minor inconvenience.

Martha views her androgynous presentation differently because for her, it means “that you are not threatening to men or women...and I think some people don’t appreciate how valuable skill that actually is.” Carla is acutely aware of her privilege because she presents as straight (in her own words, a soccer mom even). She has not had to confront the hostility that might exist towards more stigmatized forms of gender expression.

“That you are not threatening to men or women. And I think some people don't appreciate how valuable a skill that actually is.” -Martha

Gender Identity

Sam is the only transgender person I had the distinct privilege of interviewing. She transitioned to female when she was in her 60s and could not be happier and more content now as a trans woman. She hesitated to transition because she feared the unknown and feared making an irrevocable step. She was also worried about her family’s reaction. It turns out that her fears were unfounded. She works at a law firm now that could not be more supportive of her transition. Though the experiences described by most of my interviewees are largely from a cisgender perspective, I would be remiss not to highlight her struggles and her inspiring story.

Age

For Sam, who is now in her 80s, the experience of having to submerge her true nature was much more difficult when she was younger and when the world was much more viciously cruel to LGBTQ2S+ people. Having been socialized in a different time may have influenced this delay in coming to terms with her own gender identity. In contrast, my youngest interviewee Ahmed, who is in his mid-30s, knew he was gay as early as

³⁰ Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider*. 122.

high school. He only came out fully later in life in his mid-20s. While younger LGBTQ2S+ people are brought much earlier into awareness, there are clearly more peculiar situational factors at play that trumps increased societal acceptance. For Ahmed, it was his cultural and religious family environment.

Ethnicity/Culture

Although not by design, Ahmed is the only person of color I also had the privilege of interviewing. Being an out gay man with Indo-Caribbean origins who grew up in Canada, he is propelled to use his personal history and position for good. He feels that white gay people have it easier in terms of coming out with a much more mainstream gay culture. He is empowered to be visibly who he is so as underrepresented groups in the community can see a true reflection of themselves. He is inspired by the impact he can make on younger generations of LGBTQ2S+ persons of color, by helping them build courage to come out.

Sonny is aware of friends of color who have shared that they “code switch all the time and that they speak very differently at work than they do at home.” As an othered gay white male, his heightened social perceptiveness contributes to his awareness of other forms of marginalization.

“I was able to say everything I did in my life was harder because I was a woman and because I was lesbian, and everything was easier because I was white. And I was able bodied. So, I understand my privilege.” -Carla

White Privilege

Most of the white LGBTQ2S+ leaders I interviewed. were aware of their white privilege. They understood that they had certain privileges that may not have necessarily been afforded to persons of color. Carla highlights this intersectionality of white privilege as follows: “I was able to say everything I did in my life was

harder because I was a woman and because I was lesbian, and everything was easier because I was white. And I was able-bodied. So, I understand my privilege.” For Hannah, as she sits in the queer white woman space, she has tried to be very conscious of the ways in which she has been privileged or she has lacked privilege. By not being arrogant and recognizing that she speaks from a place of multiple identities, including access to power and privilege; she strives to use her “voice to amplify and support members of marginalized communities.”

Carla was pushing for diversity and inclusion initiatives in a traditional and underperforming organization. Even if she is white, as a queer woman, she also understood what it is to feel like you are on the outside looking in. As the leader trying to make change in her organization, she says of her experience “I think that was part of what enabled me to embrace that conversation credibly, authentically and meaningfully for a group of people who had felt unheard and felt that their lived experience of prejudice and discrimination was being ignored. And that allowed us to sort of engage that conversation from a place of real authenticity and purpose.”

Religion

Ahmed recalls his issues with religion, having been raised in a Muslim family. His homosexuality is not accepted in the Muslim faith and because of this, his own mother still struggles with accepting him. He has since left religion (not just the Muslim faith) altogether but continues to speak about his difficulties in reconciling his former faith with his sexuality. Melissa grew up in a religious Christian family who also had a difficult time accepting that she identified as a lesbian. For Martha, whose grandparents were Christian missionaries executed by a militant group, she grew up with the knowledge that “forcing your beliefs on somebody else could actually be really dangerous.” As a result, as a queer woman she

is never prescriptive on anybody. She does not expect people to make room for her and buy into who she is but rather, just be fair. For her, if other people disagree with who she is as a queer woman, they are entitled to their own beliefs.

Role as a Parent

Despite having gone through all the challenges in their personal lives and careers, the hardest thing a handful of these LGBTQ2S+ leaders are doing now is being a parent. For Carla, who has a daughter, “I'm hoping I'm going to end up being proudest of that, because that's the hardest thing I've ever done. To be a parent, to help another human being just become who they're meant to be is a really, really challenging and difficult thing.” Sonny, who has three children, sees himself first as a dad more than any other title or label. His experience of having children as an LGBTQ2S+ parent is different and so he talks to gay friends who have children because their experiences are more like his. This does not mean though that he does not talk to heterosexual friends as there are aspects of parenthood that are indeed more universal.

LGBTQ2S+ parenting, while legally supported in Canada is still a challenging experience for Cristina. She still has to deal with educating healthcare providers and explaining her family situation to immigration for instance. She and her wife get asked all the time who the biological mother is who gave birth to the children. This forces her to reconstruct her family in a world set up for straight couples as if to diminish her wife's role as a mother because of biology.

“I'm hoping I'm going to end up being proudest of that, because that's the hardest thing I've ever done is to be a parent...to help another human being just become who they're meant to be is a really, really challenging and difficult thing.” - Carla

Seniority

The experience of being an out LGBTQ2S+ leader evolves along with seniority in the organization. For Cristina, it took her time to gain confidence. The more experience and responsibility she had and the bigger her promotions, the more she felt comfortable being out. What she previously thought was a disadvantage has turned into a situation where, now being very senior in her organization, she cares less about what other people might say. Sonny, who holds a very senior position in his organization, has a similar experience. Nowadays, he performs his work every day anyway as if it is his last day on the job.

The experience is different for Hannah who is an associate in her firm. She tries to advocate for change in her organization but as an associate, she perceives there may be consequences. Unfortunately, she still operates in an environment where those who hold seniority hold all the power. Ahmed though was able to implement large scale LGBTQ2S+ diversity initiatives across their international offices with the help of sponsors and mentors from senior leadership. Seniority, or lack thereof is thus not necessarily a barrier if one can effectively garner support from more senior change agents within an organization.

Leadership in the Community

Voice of Leadership

I am taking this opportunity to give these accomplished and inspiring LGBTQ2S+ leaders the freedom and the voice to address issues that are important to them. What follows are their messages and calls to action to the younger generation and the business community.

Message to the Younger Generation

Melissa: Be your authentic self. Look for a workplace that you can thrive in

Carla: You're a young person. You've had to come to terms with your family... to really embrace the strength that comes from that, that you actually can. I risked my own family walking away from me, I can do anything. Because you are brave, once you've made that choice of—I will lose my family before I will lose myself.

Your willingness and your ability to speak up in a meeting, ask a challenging question, to have a voice, to have a point of view...I will say the thing that no one will say. I will be the truth teller. You have to find diplomatic ways to say it. You have to read the room. You have to do all the things you had to do with your family, like the timing. But you have a little secret weapon, which is—you care less. You had to find a way to love yourself and to withstand any rejection. And that makes you a little bit immune to the rejection of a colleague or a boss. You kind of care a little less and that gives you a huge amount of freedom.

Martha: Be brave. Be prepared to be wrong.

Don't be scared to bring your whole self. I really think when people bring their whole selves to work, everybody benefits.

Sam: Know as early as you can that this the place you want to work for.

Ahmed: Embrace who you are. This is easier said than done but respect yourself. Embracing who you are as person whether that's gay or disabled can really help you appreciate yourself and be empowered to come out when you're ready.

Hannah: To those who might be struggling, that you're not alone. You have a community that loves you and embraces you. As people with fewer barriers go through their lives, be

conscious of members who are not as privileged. (We) need to advocate for ourselves and other members of the community. It is a collective responsibility.

Message to the Business Community

Melissa: We're really good in Toronto and corporate LGBT circles. Patting ourselves on the back and having cocktail receptions and, you know, saying how progressive we all are. That is true. But we also have to acknowledge that we have a responsibility as leaders to help lift up those that are coming behind us and those that are not in the same (situation) and do not have access to the same privilege that we have.

Carla: Acknowledgement of white privilege and what it means and how to find great ways to dismantle it are important. Paying attention to and creating the space for genuine belonging and inclusion for people who don't look like the majority, or sound like the majority. And if you can create a space that feels safe for those people to talk, everybody benefits. Everybody can participate from there—the highest part of themselves—not just the people who have been traditionally marginalized but everyone. The more you can give people safety and create a space for everyone to contribute, you're doing such a huge favor for everyone. You're actually giving a gift to everybody when you create a safe space, including yourself. You're a white man of privilege who's having a really bad day. And you want to be able to share that with somebody. If you've created a safe space for everybody, then even you get a safer space to be vulnerable and to get help.

Martha: You are intentionally silencing some of the most creative and diverse voices. And I really do think that the people that create the visual effects and film content should look as diverse as the people who consume it.

Ahmed: Continue to advocate to the LGBT community and be visible allies - having that visibility can really make an impact on future

students, leaders in the pipeline and how society views the organization and the community.

Conclusion

Beginning with my own understanding of the gay experience, I started with 5 hypothesis learned qualities: 1) overcompensation 2) shared identity 3) resilience 4) the outsider perspective and 5) social perceptiveness. As I researched further and conducted interviews with LGBTQ2S+ business leaders, I attempted to confirm if their gay-specific experiences contributed to this hypothesis set of learned skills and qualities and whether these in turn, played a role in their success.

After a qualitative assessment of my interview data, I discarded two hypothesis qualities but added four new qualities: 1) bravery 2) vulnerability and authenticity 3) visibility and 4) responsibility to the community to arrive at a list of seven qualities that I believe are fundamental to the effectiveness of LGBTQ2S+ leadership. See Chart 4 below for the final list of qualities that come together to form an LGBTQ2S+ leadership toolkit.

Chart 4 - OUTsider Within LGBTQ2S+ Qualities

Initial List: OUTsider Within	
✘	Overcompensation
✘	Shared Identity
✓	Resilience
✓	Outsider / Diverse Perspective
✓	Social Perceptiveness

Final List: OUTsider Within LGBTQ2S+ Leadership Qualities	
✓	Resilience
+	Bravery
✓	Outsider / Diverse Perspective
✓	Social Perceptiveness
+	Vulnerability and Authenticity
+	Visibility
+	Responsibility to the Community

Actionable Insights: What This Toolkit Means for the LGBTQ2S+ Community

Reframe the way you think about your LGBTQ2S+ experiences, turn your attributes into assets and channel the uniqueness of your qualities towards being an effective LGBTQ2S+ leader in business.

Resilience Having survived an identity crisis and navigating a world built for straight people, you are stronger than you think. No matter the challenges, you know that if you got through that, you can get through anything.

Bravery We are brave because we make a choice to come out every day and deal with what that means. Find your voice and never be silenced.

Outsider / Diverse Perspective Do not be afraid to bring your diverse perspective to the table and challenge the status quo because we all know how important the truth is

Social Perceptiveness Use your social perceptiveness not only to guard against enemies but also to identify those people who you can lift up to be successful in their own right.

Vulnerability and Authenticity There is strength in being authentic about your queerness. Coming from a place that understands other forms of difference and

marginalization allows you to lead with vulnerability and inspire other people.

Visibility Your visibility as a role model for the community matters as a statement of pride and as a way to use your voice for good.

Responsibility to the Community As an outsider who knows how it feels like to be othered, use your voice to create safer spaces for your own community while also helping other disadvantaged groups.

Conclusive Insights

As portrayed by the variety of lived outsider-within realities specific to the LGBTQ2S+ experience, certain unique skillsets and qualities have been developed in today's LGBTQ2S+ leaders. In order to embrace the true potential of this outsider-within status, these qualities must form part of an *institutionalized leadership toolkit* that can be harnessed by both LGBTQ2S+ people as well as non-LGBTQ2S+ people alike. The outsider-within is an enlightened perspective which uses the leadership toolkit to inform and implement the values position of a leader. These values manifest themselves in desired behaviours which all contribute to effective leadership in their respective fields. The true outsider-within leader celebrates the freedom to be different within the context of greater inclusion in vision and unity against the challenges that lie ahead.



Institutionalized leadership toolkit

Applicable to:

- LGBTQ2S+ people
- non-LGBTQ2S+ people



Mindset: Freedom to be/see different within the context of greater inclusion

Appendix

Table A – Interviewee Demographic Data

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Industry	Role	Rank	Race	Partner?	Children?
Sam	Female	80s	Law	Lawyer	Senior Counsel	White	-	Yes
Melissa	Female	40s	Tech	Business Development	Senior Manager	White	Yes	Yes
Sonny	Male	50s	Finance	Strategy	SVP	White	Yes	Yes
Carla	Female	50s	Media / Finance	Executive	Director / CEO	White	-	Yes
Martha	Female	30s	Film	Executive	Managing Director	White	Yes	-
Ahmed	Male	30s	Law	HR – D&I	Specialist	Indo Caribbean	Yes	-
Hannah	Female	30s	Law	Lawyer	Associate	White	Yes	-
Cristina	Female	30s	Tech	Talent	VP	White	Yes	Yes