

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Supporting an Employee Who is Transgender or Transitioning

Supporting a transgender or transitioning employee can be a difficult, but important, endeavour. You may have an employee who has transitioned from male to female or female to male, or is planning to do so. As a leader, you play a key role in setting the tone for inclusion and respect—cornerstones for an effective team. Learning about transgender issues will help prepare you for this role. This article offers guidelines and helpful information for managers.

What it means to be transgender

Transgender (or "trans") refers to a person whose core gender identity—their inner sense of being male or female—contradicts the gender assigned at birth. Transgender people have described their experience as feeling like "a woman trapped in a man-'s body" or vice versa. Many transgender people use hormone therapy, and some undergo surgery to alter their bodies to align with their gender identity, though not all choose to do so.

Supporting an employee who is transgender

A survey carried out for Stonewall found that 35 per cent of LGBT employees have hidden that they are LGBT at work for fear of discrimination. As a manager, you set the tone for a harassment-free workplace. Your role is both to support the transitioning employee and to provide guidance to the rest of your team. You may have employees who feel uncomfortable with a transgender colleague, are not familiar with the term "transgender," or even reject working with transgender people. It is your job to promote a safe and trusting workplace that is free of discrimination for all employees.

What to expect when an employee transitions

Transitioning can be a long process for many transgender individuals. It can take years before the person "comes out," or discloses to family, friends, community, and their employer. If an individual on your team makes the decision to transition, you will need to develop and follow a plan to manage workplace issues that may arise. Here, briefly, is what to expect:

The employee might reach out to human resources (HR) for support. Each transitioning situation is different. Sometimes a transitioning employee will begin their coming out process by telling their manager. Others might first contact HR and only have minimal involvement of their manager. However, in most cases, HR will be involved in planning for the transition at work. Contact HR if you have questions or are unsure of your role in this plan.

The employee might reach out to you. Listen to the transitioning employee. Simple listening is a powerful tool for managers. Listen to the transitioning employee to understand how to be supportive at work during the transitioning process.

Your assistance programme can be very valuable in assisting with the transition process at work. Find out if there is someone in your assistance programme who has expertise in transgender issues, and encourage the employee to contact that person for additional support.
© 2026 Morneau Shepell Ltd.

Anticipate that a work leave might be needed for the transitioning employee. Transitioning sometimes involves medical procedures. The transitioning employee will tell you if time off is needed during the transition process. Contact your HR representative if you have questions about this.

"A survey carried out for Stonewall found that 35 percent of LGBT employees have hidden that they are LGBT at work for fear of discrimination. As a manager, you set the tone for a harassment-free workplace"

The workplace rights of transgender people

Transgender people are protected against harassment by law under the Canadian Human Rights Act (which was amended in 2017 to include transgender rights).

In general, transgender employees have the following rights:

- to be treated with respect
- to not be harassed or be discriminated against
- to not be fired or refused a job or promotion because of being transgender

Best practices for managers

As the leader of your team, you set the tone in building a trusting and inclusive workplace. Trust begins with respecting confidentiality. When a person talks to you about being transgender or transitioning, treat the information as confidential. Do not share this information with other members of your team. Trust is also built on a foundation of inclusion and acceptance. Make it clear to the transitioning employee through your actions and words that the employee is welcome in the workplace.

Prior to the transition

Together with the employee and HR, decide on a time frame for employees' transitioning gender expression at work. If the employee wishes, involve an assistance programme consultant in creating this plan.

Make sure you fully understand the wishes of the transitioning employee. Discuss with the employee how communications with team members should go, what will happen on their first day at work after transitioning, and about their general concerns and wishes for the transition.

Communicate beforehand with members of your team about the transition. Share only the information the employee wishes you share.

Be sure all colleagues are clear on the transitioning employee's new name, what pronouns to use (he/him or she/her), and which washroom and changing room the employee expects to use.

Educate yourself about transgender issues in the workplace. See the resources listed at the end of this article.

Know about your organization's policies. Familiarise yourself with your company's relevant policies as well as any legal requirements that apply.

Make it clear to the transitioning employee through your actions and words that the employee is welcome in the workplace.

During and after the transition

Pave the way for a smooth transition on the first day. The employee's first day on the job after transitioning is critical for setting the tone for inclusion. The transitioning employee might be nervous about being accepted after transitioning. Make sure you're clear about how the transitioning person

wants their first day back to unfold. Some might want to keep this first day low-key; others might want some sort of announcement to the work group welcoming back the employee after their transitioning. Keep the day as normal as possible, and follow the transitioning employee's wishes about how the day should go. Consider taking the employee to lunch on the first day back, maybe inviting another team member who is key in influencing others.

Schedule weekly follow-ups with the transitioning employee. Ask how things are going and assess the inclusiveness of the work environment.

Be mindful about being inclusive and sensitive. Don't schedule work-related social events or outings that might result in uncomfortable situations for the transgender employee. Plan and offer activities that are gender neutral and that everyone can enjoy.

If another employee is not accepting of a transgender colleague

In a recent survey, 90 percent of transgender workers reported experiencing harassment, mistreatment, or discrimination on the job or actively avoiding such treatment by using various strategies, including hiding who they are.

Here are steps to take to help prevent and handle such problems:

Make education about transgender issues a priority. People fear what they don't understand. The more educated people are about transgender issues, the more positive the experience will be for everyone on your team.

Have a private conversation with the employee who is not accepting of a transgender colleague. Make it clear that company policies prohibit discrimination and that inclusion and acceptance of all colleagues is non-negotiable. Be prepared to discuss specific examples of this employee's behaviour that are problematic, such as gossiping, being exclusionary, or failing to use appropriate language. Explain how this behaviour impacts the work of the team, and be clear about your expectation that the behaviour will change.

If a problem persists, refer the matter to HR. Do not let tension or conflict continue. Take action.

Ways to promote a safe and inclusive workplace

Learn about workplace diversity and inclusion and advocate for your policy regarding it. The policy should include the term "gender identity" or "transgender." If there is no such policy, urge your HR department to create, implement, and promote one. A 2012 study found that 51 percent of transgender people wouldn't work for an employer that didn't have an LGBT staff policy in place.

The more educated people are about transgender issues, the more positive the experience will be for everyone on your team.

Focus on ongoing education and on raising awareness. You might arrange for gender-inclusion awareness training for your team or department. This should cover practical matters, such as pronouns and washroom use, as well as general awareness training.

Research clearly shows that companies that support and value diversity are more likely to excel. They are better able to attract and retain talent and are more adept at creating environments where employees can do their best work. Creating full inclusion for transgender people is a valuable part of these efforts. "Employees who have a positive transition experience on the job tend to excel. They can be their authentic selves at work," says Gina Duncan, a corporate trainer and highly regarded speaker specialising in transgender dynamics in the workplace.

Resources

These organizations and websites offer information helpful to transitioning and transgender employees and the businesses that employ them:

Canadian Aids Society – Provides resources for transgendered individuals, as well as a **list of support and resources**, divided by province.

CPATH – The Canadian Professional Association for Transgender Health, a legal non-profit that aims to educate, and advocate for transgender issues.

Public Services and Procurement Canada – this Federal Government branch has provided a guide for employees and managers supporting trans employees.

The World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) – an international non-profit devoted to transgender health.

Resources also vary from province to province—be sure to search for support groups and other resources in your area!