

How To Transition at Work ... And Survive

By Tina Livingstone Introduction

Transitioning at Work is probably one of the most awesome events that you will face. Whilst you will have spent years coming to terms with your identity you will also have become aware that the majority of people are unlikely to have had any direct experience of transsexual people, and that some may have had their views clouded, if not thoroughly tarnished, with misconceptions created by media hype. Since few of us approach the unknown steadily, when you are preparing to come out at work the potential for problems and prejudice can cause a lot of anxiety. This leaflet aims to provide you with strategies to make an awesome task achievable, and ease anxieties through examples of good practice and real experience. I hope that you will find it both enlightening and useful.

We will be looking at three main aspects of transition:

- Who to tell
- How to tell
- Survival strategies

But before we look at the nuts and bolts of the process lets make sure we build from firm foundations and approach the key factor first...

{mospagebreak title=Attitude}Attitude

How you approach any situation can have a lasting effect on outcomes, and one of the most effective keys to success in this entire process is your own attitude. You may have come through a lot of emotional stress and hassle to get to this point in your life, and feel extremely apprehensive about the attitudes of others. Hold on to the fact that one of the characteristics of human behavior is our capacity for reflection, our innate tendency to respond in kind, and utilise it to your best advantage. Go in smiling. Easier said than done I know, but it is true that if you approach people with courtesy and respect the majority of them will meet you with the same.

Your entitlement to the same respect as everyone else has at last been acknowledged in the new constitution's bill of rights.

You have a clinical condition, which is recognised by International Standards of Care and our own National Health Service. Let that give you just cause without making you apologetic.

You have employment skills. Let that give you confidence without making you foolhardy.

Be positive about yourself without being pushy. This is your life and you can do it! You are informing your employer about a personal and necessary change in your life because it is both visible and permanent. Your disclosure is out of professional courtesy. Go in without arrogance or apology. Accept yourself. Believe in the future…. And Go for It!

{mospagebreak title=Who to Tell} Who to Tell

The general rule is - make no assumptions. You cannot assume that you know how anyone will react to the knowledge that you are a transsexual person. There can be quite a few surprises! People who you anticipate will bring problems might actually be supportive, and others whom you expect to be understanding may be difficult.

I have come across middle managers with supposedly set sexist attitudes who have turned out to be very supportive aids when approached with professionally presented facts. Conversely I have met supposedly supportive HR people who have paid lip service to support but actually counseled managers to get rid of their transsexual employees through "natural wastage" behind the scenes.

It was this experience that led me to advise a genuinely supportive HR lady against her first inclination to cherry pick supporters for initial disclosure as a "safe" launch for a transsexual employee. Later when the workforce had undertaken awareness raising workshops about transsexualism she was quick to realise that I had given good advice; the support raised was much wider than anticipated but from sources other than she expected.

I know some people who have successfully informed their own inner circle of colleagues several months prior to transition at work, but would point out that these were genuinely close friends whose attitudes and philosophical outlooks were well known and understood. Generally speaking I would guard against possible indiscretions and premature "outing" by taking a clearly professional and politic stance from the outset.

There are three possible points of initial contact in most business:

- Human Resources
- Management
- Union

These should be approached in a confidential and professional way, backing up the news of your intended course of action with validation from the clinic/medical professional who oversees your treatment, and reference to the Gender Reassignment Act 99. Remember that the tone in which information is given affects the way in which it is received, and try to be matter of fact without being offhand. Respect breeds respect.

{mospagebreak title=How to Tell}How to Tell: The Letter of Disclosure

Actually making any announcement can be nerve-wracking, by writing a personal letter of disclosure you do two important things:

- You ensure that salient points are covered. (People in shock don't always listen well)
- You begin a formal record of process (Start the way you mean to go on and have something to which both you or your employer may refer)

Having things written down clearly can also be a real godsend when the moment of disclosure arrives because of the human tendency in most of us to dry up, or run round in verbal circles, when nervous.

This is your opportunity to encourage the adoption of your preferred words and create shared terms of reference. For example it may be important to you that people understand the word "transsexual" as an adjective, in order that they don't lose focus on the fact you are fundamentally like them - a person. You may also have a preference for Gender Dysphoria or G.I.D. with regard to clinical term.

One of the most effective ways of encouraging respect and courtesy toward yourself is to be seen to give it to others; by reflecting this in your writing you can help to create a positive ethos. However anxious you feel inside if you are seen to be taking a reasoned and moderate approach you are more likely to be treated in a reasoned and moderate way. Setting out with positive attitudes yourself encourages co-operation, and balance in communication helps to foster equanimity in practice.

Whilst giving some explanation of your clinical condition, supported by basic facts, is helpful, avoid overloading people with a deluge of information. Supplying additional sources of information for later reference may be supportive but putting a library on somebody's desk can be an off putting experience for them, regardless of content.

A courteous communication founded in fact and showing that you are considering others goes a long way to providing a secure starting point. One side of A4 or less is usually sufficient for your letter; anymore and you may either be going into unnecessary personal detail or blinding them with science. Writing in the style with which your colleagues are familiar, be it formal or light hearted, reinforces the fact that you remain the same person in a different wrapper and will be able to maintain standards of work.

{mospagebreak title=Survival Strategies}Survival Strategies: Transitioning with Style

What you wear to work is important. Like it or not we all spend our lives making initial value judgments about people based on what we see. Your place of employment may already include staff of your own gender, and you can be guided by their dress code, which will exist whether official or not. If you are to meet with acceptance it is advisable to attempt to go with the flow and blend; unless you have particular reason to power dress, subtlety is generally appreciated by colleagues and encourages their perception of you as a reasonable person. If there is no example to follow (and this can be the case), be guided by the nature of the work. Traditionally people tend to wear smart clothes to the office, whereas practical work necessitates practical clothes. Remember that female trousers have a different cut to male ones and are not necessarily masculinising; also a feminine top can make a clear statement (though frills and over decorative effects tend to be over the top; texture of fabric, color and shade, and neckline are more subtle indicators). For the ladies separates are more practical than dresses in most situations. You can ring the changes without looking like a fashion victim; besides it gets expensive if you wear dresses because every time you spill something the whole outfit goes in the wash.

Unless you are especially confident avoid too many really bright colors all at once (like pillar box red and lime green) as these will draw attention to you, and presumably you wish to be visible as a part of the team rather than appear to be the exception to the rule. That doesn't however mean that you have to be drab! Don't be afraid of a splash of color now and then.

Shoes are of paramount importance. Go for comfort not just style, as you will be wearing them all day. If you are driving you may like to have a pair of "flats" for that purpose, to keeping the car; driving can murder even low heels, and lots of women keep a pair of "flatties" for just that purpose.

Ladies also need to be aware of skirt lengths; remember that when you sit down your skirt goes up four inches plus, which can be highly entertaining but detract from dignity. If you like short skirts be sure you can sit in them without revealing all to the world. If you wear a straight mini skirt check anyone opposite you can't actually see your crutch when you sit down; being revealing rarely promotes respect however good your legs are. Remember a shapely leg can be shown off with a back slit in longer skirts, so you don't need to cover your assets entirely.

Women in particular tend to acquire "lucky" items, perhaps because they have a wider range from which to choose. Enjoy those "magic" pieces, and let them give you an extra sparkle when you need one.

{mospagebreak title=Survival in the Boundaries} Survival in the Boundaries

We all operate within unseen social boundaries, it is not until we start crossing them that they sometimes come up and hit us in unexpected places. When one changes gender role at work that is just exactly what happens, roles change; sometimes the speed at which that is taken onboard by others is unnerving. Your gender identity is the very reason that you are undergoing treatment in the first place. It is the need of that self-identity to be fully expressed that brings about transition, where at last you leave the given gender role and assume that which is true to yourself. What is sometimes hard to acclimatise to is the speed at which that change of gender role sweeps across ones life.

You may find yourself excluded from your usual group as it expects you to align with a new one. This can be unexpected and feel hurtful, but is usually an acknowledgement of acceptance rather than a caustic exclusion. It is not unusual for female staff to adopt a nurturing role with their developing colleague, and invitations to join shopping trips and hen nights can do wonders for the ego. Similarly the lads may invite you out for a beer or include you in their banter.

However hard one wishes to be accepted within the new group it is not always easy to fit in due to lack of experience. Sometimes it is difficult to know what to say as one is unfamiliar with the parameters and expectations. Don't be afraid of asking trusted colleagues and friends for advice

The strategy that I would suggest people employ in the workplace is simple: -

Before you taking a stand on something, or say things that may inadvertently cause offence or embarrassment, run this little check through your mind " What would I think of a lady/man who said …. "

If the answer is that you think she/he would appear to be a tad "off the wall" or embarrassing then you may save yourself some blushes by keeping quiet!

Keeping a rein on your own enthusiasm without dampening your spirit is a skill, and "belonging" takes time and practice. Be patient - not only with others but also with yourself.

{mospagebreak title=Stress Management} Stress Management

However much one is looking forward to transition it is a very tiring process. Being emotionally prepared for the worst can be quite exhausting, even when it never happens. Facing the wide world 24/7 can be very wearing at times, and it is not unusual to feel low despite being happy about transitioning. You may find that you need to adjust your sleeping and get to bed earlier, especially in the first few weeks when adrenalin is running high. Those who are living the full female role may have to get up considerably earlier in order to prepare for the day. One miss with the mascara brush can be absolute hell if you are racing against the clock! Those living the male role may have similar problems with shaving, and the errors can be just as painful. As time passes you will become more competent, faster, and able to sort out those irritating bodes more easily.

Try to make a space for yourself each day in which you can truly relax, maybe a nice warm bath, some relaxing music by candle light, or a good book.

Some days it can be really hard to get out that front door, be kind to yourself and remember that you have a right to be here just like everyone else. Once out that door focus on what you are doing rather than on how you look, or indeed who might be looking at you. If you mind your own business then the majority of people won't mind you. And when somebody does look at you, which they will, try not to assume the worst, they may just be glancing your way, or even admiring you. If you wince they may indeed wonder what is going on in your life. Feeling "different" can be very disabling, remember that we are all different. The human race is a sea of individuals, none of us looking exactly as we would wish, or being exactly as we would wish to be, but most of us still worth knowing - including You.

Accept yourself and the majority of people will do the same.

{mospagebreak title=Credits/Disclaimer}Credits/Disclaimer

By Tina Livingstone B.Ed., Hons who has experience of successfully supporting individuals, families and business in the acceptance of transgender issues through TG F.A.C.T. For further details she can be contacted on 07814 492690. Mobile 07970 696332.

This information sheet is distributed by the Gender Trust and is intended as a basis for information only. The Gender Trust does not accept responsibility for the accuracy of any information contained in this sheet. Reproduced on this website with kind permission Gender Trust. Please note, this information has been written with a focus on employment and the legal framework in the United Kingdom.