In or Out?

Investigating the Forces that Compel a Gay or Lesbian Organizational Leader/Influencer to Intentionally Disclose or Hide their Sexual Orientation

A Culminating Paper submitted by

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To

SONOMA STATE UNIVERSITY

in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of

Masters of Arts in Psychology
(Organization Development Emphasis)

The culminating paper is submitted for acceptance by the faculty of the Masters Program in Organization Development

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Rohnert Park, 2009-2010
# Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................. 4  
Acknowledgements ............................................................................. 4  
Introduction .......................................................................................... 5  

**Literature Review**  
- Current and Historical Picture .................................................. 9  
- The Coming-Out Decision ................................................................. 10  
- Cautions .......................................................................................... 12  
- Organizational and Leadership Development Perspectives ........ 14  

**Researcher's Biases & Limitations** .................................................. 15  

**Methodology** .................................................................................. 16  

**Data Presentation** ........................................................................... 17  
- Authenticity & Truth .................................................................... 18  
- Internalized Homophobia ................................................................. 19  
- Fear ................................................................................................ 20  
- Split Lives ...................................................................................... 22  
- 'Outness' Continuum .................................................................. 23  
- Commitment to Something Greater ............................................ 24  

**Findings & Discussion** .................................................................... 24  

**THE COMING-OUT DECISIONAL SYSTEM MODEL**  
- The INPUT Phase ........................................................................... 26  
  - Experiences and Messages ......................................................... 27  
  - Cultural/Organizational Context ............................................... 28  
  - Personal and Philosophical Values .......................................... 29  
- The PROCESS Phase ....................................................................... 30  
  - Pick & Choose .......................................................................... 31  
  - Espoused Values Comparison ............................................... 31  
- The OUTPUT Phase ........................................................................ 32  
  - The FEEDBACK Phase .............................................................. 34  
  - The ENVIRONMENT ................................................................ 35  

**Implications & Future Research** ...................................................... 37  

**Conclusion** ..................................................................................... 38  

**References** ..................................................................................... 41
### Appendices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

For the gay or lesbian individual, “[t]he act of coming-out involves a complicated developmental process which involves, at a psychological level, a person’s awareness and acknowledgement of homosexual thoughts and feelings” (Clarke, 2007). Add to that the dynamics of the leader-follower relationship and the psychological process becomes even more complex. This paper will explore the forces that compel the gay/lesbian organizational leader (or influencer) to intentionally ‘come-out’ or remain ‘closeted’ to their followers, clients, staff, etc. with their sexual orientation. An open-system model template is proposed that helps to dissect and explain the actual decision-point process that occurs for the gay/lesbian individual.

Acknowledgements

My gratitude for the help and encouragement of faculty advisers, Judith Noel, Andrea Dyer, and Sara Tickler. Also much thanks to Peter Norlin of the Organization Development Network for his sage advice and counsel. Most notable, this research study could not have been completed without the unwavering support, love, and incredible patience of the author’s spouse, Tim Piper.
Introduction

Remaining closeted or hidden around one’s sexuality, whether or not one is gay or lesbian, is a deeply embedded value in American culture and society. As Johansson and Piercey (1994) note, “[a] primary notion rooted in the deep structure of Western society is that sexual behavior should be hidden from all except the participants” (p.240). Not surprisingly, secrecy surrounding sexual orientation, defined by Rothblum (2000) as, “[t]he way one understands oneself as a sexually and/or romantically relational being… a unique amalgamation of sexual and romantic attraction, behavior, and fantasy” (p. 193), is also a norm that is thoroughly indoctrinated and prevalent in our Western culture.

‘Coming-out’ to an organization presents even further complications, and as Lott (2009) points out, can provide the “...foundation for the level of success [one] can have in an organization” (p.55). Lott explains, “[f]or those who choose not to reveal their status, it requires an immense amount of time and effort to lie about their personal lives, often resulting in depression, exhaustion, avoiding certain people and events...” (p. 56).

Whether to ‘come-out’ or not with one’s sexual orientation is often thought of as a one-time-only decision that a gay or lesbian (or any non-heterosexual) person needs to make in their lifetime. Being ‘out’ is far from an all-or-nothing proposition, however. Instead, it is more accurately described as a continuous and iterative process for an individual where decisions are made with each new personal and professional encounter with another individual. As Hill (2009) tells us,

...[T]here is rarely a clear-cut resolution to the coming-out process. Instead, the goal is ...to develop enough resistance to internalized
oppression, enough clarity about sexual orientation and identity, and enough skill at making decisions about disclosure so that energy is freed for other life goals... what is “enough” differs for each [person]. (p. 354)

As an openly gay man who came-out at the age of 25, I made the conscious and deliberate choice to not conceal or obscure my sexual orientation in my interactions with others. I am of the belief that this has made me a more effective professional in the career decisions I have made over the past twenty years. In fact, I believe that my ability to lead in various management, supervision, and director roles, and to influence others as a trainer, executive coach, and organization development consultant has been significantly and positively influenced by that decision. Although I have experienced benefits in coming-out to my colleagues, co-workers and organizational audiences, I wonder if this decision is indeed appropriate for my gay/lesbian peers as a recommended ‘best practice’ for leadership effectiveness. In fact, is it possible that coming-out may actually harm the professional and personal relationships that the leader/influencer strives to cultivate?

I assume two dynamics with leadership and influence: 1) that there are followers, clients, or direct reports - individuals who are led, managed and/or influenced and who are consciously available to that influence, and 2) that these individuals are members of various social systems and cultures and are likely to impact and influence others within those systems and cultures. More precisely, the impact of any self-disclosure decision that the gay or lesbian leader/influencer will make, likely ripples well beyond the individual at the receiving end of the disclosure. Given this, I assume that when one who leads/influences others makes the decision to come-out, the net effect is magnified significantly, as compared to the individual who simply comes-out to a trusted friend or
family member. In the latter, that disclosure, through tacit or expressed consent, is more likely to stay contained in a closed and confidential system. However, in contrast, the overall risk of coming-out appears far greater for gay/lesbian organizational leaders (and influencers) specifically because their relationships are established such that 1) the receiver of the disclosure may be more receptive to influence, or as Klein and House (1995) explain followers are “flammable material ...open or susceptible to [leadership]”, and 2) the disclosure is more likely not to be held in confidence. With these risks, I believe that there are broader and more complex implications for the both the gay/lesbian leader and their followers, and in turn, for the multiple systems within which they live and work.

Organizational ‘influencers,’ specifically Organization Development (OD) consultants, add a slightly different variable to their decisions of whether to come-out or not to their client organizations and colleagues. Starting with the premise that many OD consultants operate with the use of “self as an agent of change” (Seashore, Shawver, Thompson, Matarre, 2004) as the primary OD tool at the consultant’s disposal, and that authentic personal transparency is critical in the effective execution of that primary tool, then another variation on the coming-out dilemma presents itself. Specifically for the gay/lesbian consultant, will an important opportunity to be most effective as an OD practitioner be missed when deciding not to disclose one’s sexual orientation, i.e., withholding a significant part of one’s authentic self and selfhood? As Tannenbaum and Eisen (2005) offer in Practicing Organization Development, “...frequently underemphasized is the personhood of the practitioner as a key variable in achieving professional effectiveness in practice” (p. 65).
Another factor for the gay/lesbian individual warrants inclusion here. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual people are estimated as composing only 3% of the current US population (based on estimate of 300 million) (Gates, 2006). Given this statistic, one might readily assume that any person one comes in contact with is heterosexual – and not gay or lesbian. With that in mind, the gay/lesbian individual has to make a very personal decision to actively dispel that often-made assumption, or operate instead within that flawed interpersonal inference of what their identity consists. Diamant (1993) uses the term “passing,” to describe this:

The concept of “passing” embodies the fact that homosexuality can be hidden from others... The decision whether or not to pass is a major life task. Every individual must make a decision as to how to manage a [lesbian or gay] identity. (p.34)

Or perhaps the point is more clearly made in this comic, from The New Yorker magazine (Sipress, 2001)

In understanding that the coming-out decision as a uniquely challenging one for the organizational leader/influencer - and that there may be great personal and professional
risk involved, so too an understanding of all that is involved in the decision is a useful one for the leadership and OD learning communities. Our understanding of leadership and organizational influence increases as we come to fully appreciate all that plays into the coming-out decision. With this imperative, to understand as much as possible about the coming-out decision, my primary research question presents itself: What are the compelling forces that lead a gay or lesbian organizational leader/influencer to intentionally hide or disclose their sexual orientation?

Literature review

Current and Historical Picture

Appreciating what it is to be gay or lesbian can be found, in part, by examining the pertinent history relevant to defining this critical terminology. In The Journal of Homosexuality (2009), the authors write in their article, Hirschfield to Hooker to Herek to High School: A study of the history and development of GLBT empirical research, institutional policies, and the relationship between the two:

Empirical gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) research has passed through three stages. ... The first period is from the late 1800s up to 1972, when research focused on categorizing homosexuality as a disease... The second period ran from 1972 to approximately 1990, when researchers began to apply the disease model not to GLBT persons, but rather to those having negative attitudes toward homosexuality (homophobia)... The third period began in the early 1990s and continues today, when researchers focus on...changing institutions. [i.e., organizations of government, public service, and society] (pp. 56-57)

In their book, Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past, Duberman, Vicinius, and Chaucey (1990) pointedly contend that a clear understanding of what it is to be gay or lesbian is still a contemporary dilemma.

Daniel Ceballos 9 In or Out? Investigating
[G]ay history has necessarily engaged profound philosophical questions concerning the definition and constitution of the self... Yet such exploration has been impeded by the lack of consensus concerning the essential characteristics even of contemporary gay or lesbian identity and culture. (p. 7)

Noteworthy too is that the very notion of what it is to be gay/lesbian changed significantly with the sea-changing announcement made by the American Psychiatric Association (APA), when in 1973 it dropped 'homosexuality' from its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) handbook as a pathological condition. The prominent American gay rights activist, Barbara Gittings, who organized the Daughters of Bilitis (the first lesbian rights organization in the United States) was a leader in the movement to get the APA to drop homosexuality as a mental illness. In the Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health (2008), she calls attention to the power of that decision in changing the environment in this country as it understood gay/lesbian sexual orientation:

It’s difficult to explain to anyone who didn’t live through that time, how much homosexuality was under the thumb of psychiatry. The sickness label was an albatross around the neck of our early gay rights groups—It infected all our work on other issues. Anything we said on our behalf could be dismissed as "That's just your sickness talking." The sickness label was used to justify discrimination, especially in employment..." (p. 289)

With this radical departure from ‘pathological’ to ‘normal,’ the very definition of what it is to be gay or lesbian is still a relatively sensitive undertaking for the social sciences and academia.

**The Coming-Out Decision**

Coming-out is defined by Robert Eichberg (1990) in his book, *Coming-out*, as “[a] process, not a singular event” (p.40), and he makes the argument that this process is
predominantly a positive and empowering experience:

As long as we hide our sexuality it takes on extra weight and added significance. ...As we move into the public phase of the process, the phase in which liberation and freedom occur, we generally experience exhilaration, aliveness, and a sense of well-being. ...If you feel good about who you are, you will present your sexuality as just a part of yourself. (pp.15-82)

Eichberg qualifies his argument, saying that coming-out decisions need to be considered not only from the stance of the individual who is coming-out, “Telling the truth is difficult, if not impossible, if you do not trust yourself to cope effectively with the consequences of the truth. It is not someone else’s reactions and responses you must trust, it is yourself” (p. 22), but he also places accountability squarely on the shoulders of the individual at the receiving end of the disclosure. He says, “[w]hen you come out to someone, you put them in the personal phase of their own process” (p.79). He also contends that it is the relationship between these two participants that helps dictate whether further disclosure is appropriate. “Feedback received from others is often used to determine whether it is safe to continue the coming-out process” (p.44).

Argument is lent to the imperative of coming-out in The Journal of Gay and Lesbian Psychotherapy, where Clarke (2007) contends:

[T]he need for a sense of wholeness—and the existential anxieties created by not experiencing oneself as an authentically sexually integrated person—makes coming-out a priority. The desire to seek a way of coming together with oneself and the world, and a need to live authentically (without hiding any parts of the self) is what prompts coming-out. (p. 68)

Looking at the complexity of the coming-out decision, as it relates to the decision when it is made in one’s work environment, Levine and Leonard (1984) note that “[c]oming-out at work typically causes lesbians and gay men a great deal of anxiety about
both formal and informal employment discrimination” (p. 705). Garnets and Kimel (1993) give us additional context, saying,

"Coming-out at work involves a complicated assessment of the relative safety, sanctions, and interpersonal support. Often there are both real and anticipated negative consequences. ...Realistic costs and benefits exist when coming-out so that many gay men and lesbians are out in certain areas of their lives but not in others. (p. 188)

Suffice to say, the coming-out experience for gay/lesbian individuals working as employees, consultants, or leaders for organizations is challenging and risky at many levels. This research-study attempts to surface and examine the factors, risks, and contextual issues of coming-out, and understand how they relate to gay/lesbian leaders and influencers of organizational communities.

Cautions

The literature is not as robust in its cautionary tales of coming-out as in its encouragement. However, there are some important exceptions. Eubanks-Carter, Burckell and Goldfried (2005) tell us that,

[Early coming-out models associated disclosure with developmental maturity, [but] more recent affirmative approaches suggest to practice caution ...not to encourage disclosure if it would endanger [individuals]... Financial and living situations, regional attitudes and mores, and interaction with other aspects of identity influence the viability of disclosure and should be taken into account. (pp. 1-18)

Perez and Amadio (2004) agree saying “…research has produced contradictory evidence on the psychological impact of disclosure: it has been associated with more self-acceptance and social support, but also increased distress, possibly due to increased exposure to discrimination” (p. 310).

There are some references that plainly dispute the popular identity development
models that posit ‘mature’ identity development that necessitate coming-out for healthy psychological social development. Hill (2009) captured the argument, saying, “...these early models do not take into account the variable risk associated with disclosure, depending on geographic location, religious tradition, racial/ethnic background, gender, and attitudes of family and friends” (pp. 349-350).

Additionally, other components and layers of one’s demographic identity and makeup such as one’s race, gender, or ethnicity can come into play, and further challenge these models. This recognition is hampered by the developers of the models themselves.

Stage models of the coming-out process share several limitations. Many have relied on retrospective accounts from predominantly white and male samples, creating an illusion of uniformity. ...They do not adequately capture or normalize gender differences, or the wide variation in experience among individuals with alternative sexual orientations. (Hill, p. 350 )

Brazzel (2007) maintains that “[g]roup identities are complex, interdependent, and cross-cutting. Full understanding of any one group identity requires considering multiple other identities.”

Accurate definition for the gay and lesbian community becomes even more muddled with the acknowledgement that sexual orientation and gender identity are often confused and misunderstood in how they may overlap and relate to each other. In the Journal of Gay and Lesbian Mental Health (2008), Sandfort writes,

Current approaches to linkages between gender identity and sexual orientation are rather polarized...the nature of their relationship is often presented in a dogmatic way...In traditional ‘gay and lesbian studies’, the relationship is almost completely ignored. (p. xxi-xxiv )

Indeed, providing powerful insight into the phenomena of overlapping identities, the following description of what it might be like to be African American, gay and an
organizational member is a useful one. Taken from *Special Report: The Coming-Out Challenge* by Annya M Lott (2009),

The daily experience for the African American LGBT has unique challenges and often deals with additional social pressures in the workplace. We are minorities...because of sexual orientation. We are minorities...because of sex, race, and gender. In the LGBT community, we are minorities because of race... [and that] results in ‘isolation and loneliness’. ...This can be challenging because the [individual] is forced to choose between two groups that may not fully accept them. (pp. 55-56)

Organizational and Leadership Development Perspectives

There is very little in the professional OD and leadership development literature that points to the coming-out question directly, but there are some important citations that frame the imperative. In his work, *Organization Development as a Profession and a Field*, Bob Marshak (2006) explains, “[p]ower, diversity, and oppression theories are largely peripheral to mainstream OD....and practice theories of diversity and social justice ... are mostly tangential to mainstream OD practice” (p. 25). Marshak, however, contends that “[t]here are many opportunities for incorporating diversity, inclusion, and social justice perspectives into OD” (p. 27). He further explains,

Appreciation is needed for how dominant and subordinated group identity, power differences, prejudice and the ‘isms’ can be included as an integral part of these theories, models, and processes...the use and implementation of these models can unknowingly mitigate against the inclusion and social justice of subordinated identity group members and negatively impact their life and work experiences. (pp. 13-27)

Marshak concludes, “[g]iven the core values of OD and the increasingly diverse and multicultural organizational settings for its practice, it is clear that all professional practitioners need to fully understand and as appropriate address multicultural and diversity issues and dynamics...” (p. 35).
Edgar Schein (1992), arguably the most respected thought leader on understanding organizational culture, also gives some useful perspective supporting the imperative for coming-out disclosures as they relate to impacting organizational culture and climate:

One of the most powerful mechanisms that founders, leaders, managers, or even colleagues have available for communicating what they believe in or care about is what they systematically pay attention to... Even casual remarks and questions that are consistently geared to a certain area can be as potent as formal control mechanisms and measurements. (p.231)

Linking leadership development to the coming-out process, especially as it relates to concepts such as leadership integrity and authenticity, Cooper and Sawaf (1997) state in _Executive EQ: Emotional Intelligence in Leadership and Organizations_,

Ordinarlly, we think of speech as words projected out, directed at others. Yet the opposite is true for real speech, for genuine dialogue. In these interactions, you are actually inviting the other person to come inside your world, into your mind and heart. (p.68) It comes down to being authentic with yourself, being authentic with others...Integrity can be seen as a deepening of emotional honesty. (p.165)

With so little in the professional and academic literature to provide a definitive perspective on coming-out, this research study will move to fill some of that void.

**Researcher’s Biases & Limitations**

As an openly gay man who has believed that there was an imperative for gay and lesbian people to be out and to affirm their homosexuality, I have my share of biases with this particular research. Even as I conducted the interviews and wrote the literature review for this research, I noticed my attention went to those contributions that supported my point of view. In knowing and understanding this dynamic, which may be
an obstacle to obtaining the highest quality data, I leaned into neutrality whenever possible. In my literature review, I intentionally have cited instances where the literature has pointed to the ambiguity of the coming-out decision – that there are indeed times when a gay or lesbian leader is best counseled to be cautious in making that decision. Similarly, in my choice of interviewees, I sought out individuals who have made the choice not to come-out in their leadership role. Not surprisingly, those individuals are challenging to identify: not coming-out by definition assumes secretiveness, privacy, and remaining ‘closeted.’ It was difficult to identify and attract those closeted gay/lesbian interview subjects who would choose not to disclose their sexual orientation, much less discuss their sexual orientation with a researcher. In an effort to control this bias in my interview pool, I identified three individuals who had indicated that they had made the choice to both come-out and not come-out at different points in their lives and careers. Additionally four more participants disclosed during their interview that they too had chosen at times to come-out, and at other times, did not.

Methodology

This is a phenomenological qualitative research study looking at the coming-out decision for gay/lesbian organizational leaders and influencers. Primary data for the study was obtained through interviews with eight individuals, all currently residing in the San Francisco, CA or the Seattle, WA areas. Half of the eight interview subjects were gay men, and the other half lesbian women. These individuals were selected by the researcher after a general call for volunteers and recommendations was placed through
the Sonoma State University Organization Development list-serve, as well as two on-line social networking locations whose subscribers were LGBT identified.

A total of five organizational leaders and two OD professionals are represented, and an additional interviewee is also included who, although is not an organizational leader in the traditional sense, holds an influential group role in a gay-identified community based organization. All eight interview subjects, therefore, were considered organizational leaders or influencers. Additionally, all are ‘out’ in their decision to publicly disclose their sexual orientation in both their public and private lives.

The interviews all were conducted by phone, with two exceptions that were conducted in person. At the request of the interviewee, a follow-up call was conducted with one subject. All interviews were voice-recorded with recorded permission given by the subjects, and then transcribed. Interview data was then collected and sorted into thematic categories.

For clarity in design and implications, no other gender-identity or sexual orientation other than gay and lesbian was included in this research (i.e, bisexual, transgender, etc.). Demographic descriptions of the subjects and the pseudonyms that will be used in this research study can be found in Appendix A.

Data Presentation

There were two original questions driving this research study: 1.) What is the process that occurs for gay/lesbian organizational leaders when they confront the decision of whether or not to come-out? 2.) How is the impact of their leadership influenced by this coming-out decision? Interviewees were presented with these
questions (and others) prior to their interviews (see Appendix A). As interviews were conducted however, an inordinate amount of time and energy was spent by interviewees on addressing the first question, but not the second. With this, my research question and analysis were refined so that they predominantly addressed the informative points in the coming-out decisions for gay and lesbian leaders, and not necessarily the leadership impact of those decisions.

Using the interview data that addressed this, five thematic data categories were identified. Each of these themes is supported by at least six of the eight interviewees (75%) and each is described below.

**Authenticity & Truth**

Interviewee responses included references to the power of disclosing sexual orientation as being a personally reassuring and comforting experience. Virginia, a 69 year old white lesbian woman, ex-Catholic nun, and retired Director of The Pastoral Life Services Department (a major leadership office in the Catholic Church), said, “I have no regrets. I’m at peace by telling the truth. Truth allows you to live well.”

Similarly, Oscar, a 64-year old white gay man, and current president of the largest member network for OD professionals in the world, considers authenticity in his willingness to come-out to clients as a requirement for his work as an effective OD practitioner. He says,

“If it’s possible and I can find a way to be open, authentic, and congruent, I will always opt for that. … I see my job as to authentically embody the best parts of myself. What’s the right combination and portfolio in myself that I want to assemble – and how can I be most authentically myself?”
Alexander, a 54 year-old Jewish gay man, retired supervisor, manager and board member from a multinational $36 billion corporation for consumer electronics, networking and communications technology/services, expresses a similar perspective. He mentions the realized advantage he experiences at work when he says, “The ability to be more out and more authentic made me more effective in my job... Authenticity has always been my general orientation. That’s a bias of mine- that people in general need to be authentic.”

Eleanor, a 54 year old white lesbian Chief of Police for a town of 12,000 in Sonoma County, CA, the first woman to head a police department in the county, and only the fifth female Chief of Police in the state explains that when she was hired, she not only came-out to her new boss, but also in her disclosure she explained what she was not. She said, “When I was hired...I told Chet, I’m not one of those... I’m not an activist, you’re not going to see bumper stickers on my car, or making an issue by holding [my spouse’s] hand or kissing her in public. I mean if I were straight I wouldn’t do that. It’s just not me.”

Leonardo, a white 76 year-old gay man, veteran, retired psychotherapist, and clinical supervisor says that when considering whether to be truthful and fully authentic, he has no choice in the matter. He says, “But my feeling was I can’t be any different than I am. I was just myself.”

Internalized Homophobia

Homophobia is the irrational fear of homosexuals and homosexuality, and like the definitions for gay and lesbian, is best understood for this research as a multi-dimensional social construct. At the core of this construct lives the notion of internalized homophobia, a powerful force helping the individual to shape his/her own identity of what it is to be gay or lesbian. Meyer and Dean (1998) define it as “…a set of negative
attitudes about homosexuality, which is developed in...socialization and is subsequently applied to an individual's perception of ... one's own same-sex attraction.” (pp. 160-186)

This phenomena was identified and named specifically by all eight respondents as an obstacle to fully coming-out personally and professionally. Alexander, who has been out professionally and personally with everyone he knows for many years describes it as a still ever-present and insidious force when he said, “I don’t know if you ever can get rid of internalized homophobia.”

Oscar also speaks to it as a continual struggle, saying,

“Am I colluding with my internalized homophobia or am I simply choosing to be private? That’s an endless, endless conversation in me. I don’t think it ever gets quieted down completely... Homophobia is alive and well everywhere... including in me.”

Martina, a 72 year old white lesbian woman and retired external OD consultant, gives tremendous insight into the difficulty of recognizing what exactly constitutes

internal homophobia versus what is simply smart OD consultant practice. She explains,

“And I’m sure my own homophobia was what said to me to not get in the way of [the client’s] process. ... So it’s good OD practice and it’s my own internalized homophobia.... Maybe it’s all in my own mind ... I’m afraid [when I come-out] that people will stop and say, ‘That’s new information.’ If it stops the conversation even for a split second as people integrate that information, then I’m afraid that the next stop for them is that they won’t find me credible. ...But it’s my own stuff ... I prefer to protect myself and the process I was paid to lead, rightly or wrongly. ...But which was the chicken and which was the egg? Well, my own self-protection was probably the first.”

Fear

Six participants spoke of concerns that they experienced prior to coming-out, specifically believing that if they were to come-out, then certainly some unwelcome harm or consequence would befall them. As Virginia said, “Coming-out always involves risk.
With risk, we carry fear.” Audrey agrees, saying “Coming-out is scary enough. And there are still places of fear for me...I literally don’t know how to do it... how to be ok... how to react.”

Interviewees commented on the environment of systemic oppression, threats of violence, homophobia and stereotypes that are woven into the identity of what it means to be a gay or lesbian person, and the fears that accompany those perceptions. Harvey, a 38 year-old gay man of Mexican-Filipino descent, and Senior Project Manager for one of the largest combination natural gas and electric utilities in the United States, said in his interview, “I was uncomfortable discussing my private life. What would they think? How would it affect my ability to be successful in my career? And what about my overall safety...my physical and emotional safety?”

Alexander mentions in his interview a similar fear but interestingly, he contrasts the organizational safety he experiences with what’s happening at the individual level. He said, “At an institutional level I felt safe. But it was more at the interpersonal level that I needed to feel safe.”

Eleanor, on the other hand, spoke of the fear she experienced at the institutional level when she hired as the Chief of Police. She told me,

“When the city manager told me that I was the unanimous choice, and the job was mine... I hung up and said WOO-WOO! But they didn’t know I was gay... and I didn’t want to be run out on a rail... I thought they would fire you for that. They wouldn’t hire you for it.”

Oscar identifies his fear of coming-out as existing beyond the interpersonal or institutional levels, instead he describes it on a greater more expansive social level. He explained, “Even as important progress is being made, there is always the possibility of backlash - in equal or greater force.”
In their book, *Psychological Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Male Experiences* (1993), authors Garnets and Kimel explain the phenomena of gay and lesbian people living ‘split lives’ when they tell us,

> The most common coping strategy reported is that gay men and lesbians tend to lead somewhat double-life at work, putting a significant amount of energy into monitoring a heterosexual façade through the use of managed information, avoidance of leisure with coworkers and separation of work and home life. (p. 24)

Eleanor told me of one example of how this was manifested in her life when she utilized the all too common practice of referring to one’s same sex partner with ‘opposite sex’ descriptions. She said, “I admit it. Back in the day, I did change pronouns.” Harvey mentioned this also when he told me,

> “I was very careful who I shared my intimate life with. I still lived my double-life. I neutralized my conversation so that I wouldn’t be tied back to an LGBT life. Sometimes I said ‘she’. It was hard to connect my two lives.”

At one point in her interview, Audre, a 45 year old white lesbian woman who is a division manager and supervisor for a $3 million multi-county human services nonprofit in northern California, responds to the interview question, “What would you tell people if someone said, ‘Oh, your husband must be so proud’?” In her answer, she tells an insightful story:

> “One time was really uncomfortable. Normally, I deflect the question... I change the subject. But one time I was in an absolute panic. I got a phone call [from my same-sex partner]. I looked at my phone, and I paused, and I thought ‘What are you going to do?’ There were several executive directors with me... so I said, “Oh, that’s [a colleague], I gotta go!’ And I got up and left. I actually got up and ran.”
Oscar spoke of the need to bridge his ‘split lives’ when he said, “I became determined to live a congruent life,” and Virginia, likewise spoke of her struggle, saying, “All those years I struggled with my sexuality. I felt guilty... I can’t do this. I tried so hard to be heterosexual.”

‘Outness’ Continuum

Interview participants spoke of a need to take each opportunity to come-out as a unique moment, with a unique choice to make. And despite the fact that all interviewees stated definitively that it was important for them to be ‘out,’ the reality of their lives and careers *at certain times* demanded that they could not always be consistent with that personal conviction. The interviewees spoke of the need to take deliberate care with each opportunity that presented itself, and not to assume that it was indeed wise and/or safe to come-out. As Garnets and Kimel (1993) explain, “Managing outness, that is one’s openness about one’s gay or lesbian identity, is an import aspect of management of potentially stigmatizing information concerning one’s homosexuality” (p.186). When Alexander’s boss asked him, ‘How will you present yourself as a gay person at work?’, he responded, “I’m not going to hide who I am, or who my partner is- but I’m not going to be, ‘Hi, I’m Alexander, I’m gay.’

As an OD consultant, Martina explained her philosophy when she told me,

“I think to come-out ... with a client with whom the relationship is at the personal level, to share more personally, then yeah, it makes sense. If it’s strictly an organizational thing and it doesn’t seem relevant or appropriate, then no, it doesn’t make sense.”

Leonardo defines the continuum another way. He circles back to what it fundamentally takes for an individual to come-out. He asks, “How are you going to be out? Explicitly or implicitly? And that goes back to, how self-accepting are you?”
Commitment to Something Greater

Six participants described one of the resulting impacts of coming-out as contributing to some larger societal movement. They spoke of consequences of coming-out that included helping society at large in its acceptance and valuing of diverse communities and social change.

As Chief of Police, Eleanor spoke of the need to act as a role-model for others when she came-out saying, “I think it’s important that people know that we can hold big jobs. I want to give someone hope- especially teenagers... I want them to know that they can be anything that they want.”

Virgina speaks to the spiritual imperative of coming-out. She explained that when questioned about her views on homosexuality from the Catholic Church perspective, she said,

“This is the question that I think ended my career...I said, “They [the church] say you can be who you are, but you can not live it out.... But that is the greatest gift we can give: living out who we are to our creator.”

And lastly, Harvey defines coming-out as both a strategic business practice and as having far-reaching global impact. He said,

“It’s not just a LGBT issue, it’s everyone’s issue. It’s a business strategy. ... We judge ‘the right thing to do’ by bottom-line standards. ... If we can take this kind of angle, we can change the country for the greater good...we can change the world.”

Findings/Discussion

Integrating both the interview data and research, a process reveals itself that helps to explain the shared experience that gay and lesbian leaders progress through
when considering whether to come-out or not to their colleagues and organizational clients. This process maps out that which happens for these leaders that is not observable (i.e, what prompts coming-out), as opposed to the visible and observable effects of that decision. This is an open system process and plays out such that when a specific set of criteria is brought into the decision-making field, another distinct set of dynamics is prompted, which in turn prompts a third. Together these three sets of criteria can be labeled as system steps or process phases for the coming-out decision.

The first step in the process is the input phase where what happened in the past that is relevant to the decision-point is considered. This step lends itself to the second step, a process phase which occurs for the individual internally at the conscious and subconscious levels. These two phases lead to the third phase, the final coming-out decision, or the output. These three interdependent stages, the input, process, and output, point us towards a systems-template for understanding the complex decision dynamics. A feedback loop that supplies additional data into succeeding coming-out decision opportunities completes a fourth phase of the decision-making system. These four components of the system exist not in a vacuum, but in an external environment of cultural and social forces that shape the coming-out decision and directly influence its outcome.

All of these pieces: the input, the process, the output, the feedback, and the external environment are all seen in the following model (Figure 2) illustrating the coming-out decision point. Commonly referred to as an IPOF template, this is an open system model that takes into account the dynamic nature of a seemingly linear decision-making process.
COMING-OUT DECISIONAL SYSTEM MODEL

The INPUT Phase

In this component of the IPOF system, the final decision of whether to disclose or hide one's gay/lesbian sexual orientation is in part first dependent on what information and experiences the individual has already experienced in his or her life. In order to assess what the actual input is for an individual, certain questions can be considered: Has
the individual experienced supportive or unsupportive episodes in their life when their sexual orientation was questioned? Have they been at the receiving end of homophobic words and actions, or have they felt supported, safe and encouraged? In answering these questions, the socially constructed layers of homophobia become important to understand; for along with the internalized homophobia described earlier, interpersonal and institutional homophobia come into the picture.

*Interpersonal homophobia* is manifested when a personal bias or prejudice affects relations among individuals, transforming prejudice into its active component—prejudice. *...Institutional homophobia* refers to the ways in which governments, businesses, and educational, religious, and professional organizations systematically discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation or identity. (Blumenfeld, 1992, pp.4-5)

The results of being on the receiving end of homophobic words and actions are what constitutes a good portion of what is considered the *input* for the model. As Harris, Cook and Kashubeck-West (2008) explain, “Higher levels of... homophobia have been associated with lower levels of self-acceptance, low self-esteem, shame, and acceptance of social myths about homosexuality.”

*Experiences and Messages*

Experiences and messages for the gay/lesbian individual can be encouraging, as when Virginia explains how her therapist told her, “Until you really address your sexuality, you will never have an intimate relationship...something about that that rang in my ears.” But, unfortunately, and quite often, the messages are not encouraging. This was certainly true when Martina reflected on her role within her church and how the messages she received from that institution reinforced her own fears and trepidations.

“I was crushed- that was the biggest thing for me. An institution meant so much to me and I meant so much to the institution, and
still I was beyond the pale [to be considered as a church leader]. They'll hate the sin and love the sinner. That really fueled my fear.”

Messages are often received buried in the specific words and verbiage one experiences while growing up. As a child, Leonardo recalls what he heard from his grandmother, when she asked him, “Are you a fruiter?” Leonardo explained that message was particularly hurtful – he felt his grandmother’s heartfelt intention was to actually be loving and supportive of her grandson when she said that.

Hurtful stereotypes such as “fruiter” insidiously enter into the social construct of gay/lesbian identity development. The implications, threats, and dangers of that brand of language are beyond the scope of this study, but they are very much part of the input for the coming-out decision. Herek (1998) succinctly captures the breadth of of the stereotyping that occurs for lesbian women and gay men in his article, Stigma and Sexual Orientation: Understanding prejudice against lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals, where he writes:

Some empirically derived stereotypes of lesbians include the beliefs that lesbians tend to be independent, to not be easily influenced, to not give up easily, to have a need for security, to be significantly different from the ‘normal, healthy adult’, to be positive toward females, to be masculine, to have short hair, to be negative toward males, to be too blatant, and to be a bad influence on children.... Gay men are stereotyped to be interested in sex, to be emotional, to have a need for security, to be neat, to enjoy art and music, to be significantly different from the ‘normal, healthy adult’, to be positive toward males, to be feminine, to have high-pitched voices, to wear jewelry, to be creative, and to be complicated. (p.67)

Cultural/Organizational Context

Every one of the interviewees mentioned the importance of taking into account the immediate contextual cues and environmental information that provided data as to the ‘safety’ of the decision of whether to come-out or not. This kind of information is
critical input into the decision-making system for an individual. It includes inferring aspects of the organization that include the level of reception that coming-out may elicit, one’s history, and the perceived trust-level with the particular organizational audience. For example, Martina recognized that her involvement with her church actually tempered her willingness to come-out, saying that she didn’t come-out because, “The church stuff was really huge for me... had it said that sexual orientation had no relationship to my leadership [role], then I may have stepped into the light with it and come-out.”

Oscar describes organizational context another way, saying “In some environments, to not be authentic and congruent would be to seen as secretive and culturally inappropriate. We have to make decision how we are going to be in relation to the dominant culture.”

In his interview, Harvey describes organizational context that encourages his coming-out. In his workplace he offered how the leadership of his organization had actively taken a stance to support a culture that promotes the integration and celebration of diversity – especially LGBT issues. He explains, “It’s great to work in an environment where everyone is valued. It’s a breath of fresh air. Taking non-popular, questionable stance, taking flack and holding ground... makes for an amazing culture to work under.”

Personal and Philosophical Values

There are a host of values and the ‘modus operandi’ that color the decision-making process for an individual. This includes the deeply held and very personal ways of assessing life, personal challenges, and the environment surrounding that individual. Every interviewee stated that without this internal screening value-set to sort through their thoughts and feelings, their effectiveness as both a leader and as a person, suffers.
Alexander succinctly captured his values and philosophy when he shared in his interview, “Authenticity has always been my general orientation. That’s a bias of mine—that people in general need to be authentic.” Oscar offers a similar philosophy when he says, “If it’s possible and I can find a way to be open, authentic, and congruent, I will always opt for that. But there are many confabulating influences.”

Likewise, Martina explains,

“The imperative for a good OD consultant is to work their stuff out so they’re not projecting it onto the client or reflecting it back to them beforehand... so they’re not hooked into the client system. You have to have your pipes cleaned out to be a consultant- and that’s my work. That’s the work that I would do with a good friend or counselor or intimate partner, and not with a client.”

Audre speaks of being ‘guarded’ when sharing her sexual orientation. She explains how that stance comes from a very strategic assumption she is making.

“First of all because it’s nobody’s business unless I make it their business. Because it’s of a personal nature, that’s what keeps me guarded. When I’m talking to another professional, I want to be respected and looked at as a professional who knows what they’re talking about. I don’t ever want to think oh well, she’s sleeping with another woman, so she couldn’t possibly know what she’s talking about.”

Later in her interview, Audre offers some pithy (and powerful) advice to other gay and lesbian leaders who might come across similar decision-making crossroads as hers. She says, “If you don’t want to be regarded for your sexuality, but more for being a professional, then I would say just be subtle in your sexuality...keep ‘em guessing!”

The PROCESS Phase

In this central component of the decision-making system, the individual takes the data from the input received and then wrestles through the internal machinations that
churn through and direct the final output; in this case, the decision of whether or not to come-out.

*Pick & Choose*

Both the interviews and the literature review support the notion that individuals very often struggle with questions that include: Given the input of data I have, perhaps I need to be selective in who I come-out to, as well as when and how? Perhaps I should only come-out in those instances when I perceive adequate safety and reception levels?

Oscar captures the essence of this internal rumination when he explains, “It's about being strategic, and choosing opportunities where a small action will have great impact, and making sure I take advantage of that. I don’t lose opportunities. I’m alert.”

Audre goes into her processing in a bit more detail. She says, “I pick and choose where it feels right and where it doesn’t feel right. And I certainly do that for professional reasons. It’s calculated. You have to ask yourself what’s more important- is demonstrating your sexuality more important than your professional stature? If both are important, just know that you really have an uphill battle.”

Martina offered a compelling metaphor to help appreciate how the coming-out decision plays out when she says, “I think it really helps the more genuine you are with a client.. but not throwing open the whole kimono!” She explains, “It means picking and choosing and showing that you’re a real feeling and breathing human being.”

*Espoused Values Comparison*

Many participants reached a time in their interview where they recognized some incongruence with one of their own deeply held values; specifically that coming-out was
always the right the thing to do. They realized that there were times when they made an exception to this value and in fact, chose not to come-out.

Martina and Oscar, both OD consultants, describe the struggle in aligning their personal values with how they want to work with their clients. Martina offered the following.

“I didn’t really come-out to anyone as a consultant because of my own sense of organization development which says to stay out of the way of their [the client’s] process. When working with a client system, it really isn’t about you.”

And Oscar relates to the question with this thinking:

“I see my job as to authentically embody the best parts of myself. I see my personae in a rather fluid way. What’s the right combination and portfolio in myself that I want to assemble – and how can I be most authentically myself?”

Further refining his description of his internal process, Oscar handily captures his philosophy with the following:

“I came to the conclusion that I had several rules of thumb: one, that if I was ever asked directly, I would always tell the truth. Secondly if I were ever put in a situation where I felt uncomfortable... that I would always be open about my choices and about my decision to live a congruent life.”

Processing all the various input information and transforming it into an effective output decision requires the gay/lesbian individual to engage in this kind of philosophical rendering. The coming-out decision is complicated, challenging, and deeply personal.

**The OUTPUT Phase**

Here the gay or lesbian leader decides what final form their coming-out, if they choose to do so, will take. As Martina definitively puts it in describing her coming-out decision: “I’m 69 now...and if I decide I can’t be out now, when can I be? Damn the
torpedoes!” In comparison, but equally as definitive, is the other side of the being-out coin. As Eleanor remembers being interviewed for a leadership role, “They asked me directly, and I lied.”

With some additional qualification, Audre also speaks to being clear in her commitment to being authentic, however she explains that she is not actively out to those with whom she works. She said, “I would have to answer honestly... I won’t lie about who I am. I may not disclose it- openly- I may not advertise it- but I’m not going to lie about who I am. Because it is who I am.”

Eleanor offers a similar sentiment, saying,

“I’m not an activist. You’re not going to see bumper stickers on my car, or making an issue by holding [my spouse’s] hand or kissing her in public. I mean if I were straight I wouldn’t do that. It’s just not me. It is what it is. We are what we are. I am what I am.”

When questioned a bit further, Eleanor gives some more parameters to her ‘outness’, explaining that taking a more passive attitude in how she reveals her identity as a lesbian woman, serves her well. She explains,

“The more normal you can be, the more normally people accept you. The ones who were in people’s face about it... they didn’t seem to quite get along in the organization. Maybe that’s why I adopted the passive attitude... because it doesn’t seem to get in my way.”

Leonardo provides an interesting variation to the argument, saying that to a certain degree, the decision to actively come-out is irrelevant to whether one is thought of as gay/lesbian. He explains,

“I’m making an assumption- that every moment that you’re alive you’re broadcasting to that person who you are and what you are. You can’t help but be self-revealing. You may not be conscious of it, but it’ll be there. So with the people that you’re leading, it will come up on their screen whether you want it to or not. They will read who you are.”
Later in his interview, Leonardo captures the reflexive nature of the coming-out decision and differentiates between externally coming-out to others and in his estimation, the more valuable *internal* coming-out process. He offers, “If you don’t accept yourself, how will others accept you? And if you accept yourself, then it won’t matter if others do or not.”

**The FEEDBACK Phase**

The feedback loop informs the input stage for the next coming-out decision that the individual will encounter.

At times, interviewees spoke of the concrete feedback they received from those whose opinions they valued, and how that impact provided the feedback loop for their coming-out decision system. For example, Alexander’s commentary, “We brought in a company shrink that said you’re normal, they’re not. That made a difference to me in surviving the craziness. I’m the gay one and I was sane.”

In addition, Alexander’s feedback loop proved to be a reinforcing one, strengthening his resolve. He explains, “The ability to be more out- more authentic- made me more effective in my job. I kept pushing the envelope and nothing bad happened- so I kept going.”

Feedback also comes in the form of personal lessons and insights gained from coming-out... recognitions of the perceived effectiveness and impact of the decision. Those insights inform future coming-out decision opportunities providing additional input data into the decision-making system. As Leonardo said, “You see the practical implications of being out- when there are more of you [individuals who are not closeted]. Then, it doesn’t make sense to be in the closet.”
Ultimately, the feedback loop is one that helps to shape the philosophical stance for the individual— a recognition that the choice one makes is a choice of responsibility and accountability with future implications outside of the immediate system-view being considered here. As Virginia said,

“Telling the truth about anything is the most authentic way we can live our lives. ... It has amazing ripple effects that we can’t even predict. It diminishes that fear that you have about being found out... Once truth is out ... there is a new freedom.”

**The ENVIRONMENT**

The last component in the coming-out decisional IPOF model considers the social, political, generational, and cultural environment in which the decision is being made. This in many ways is the primordial atmosphere that the ‘in-or-out’ decision evolves from. It can both powerfully mitigate and/or nourish the individual’s capacity to make the ‘right’ decision. It occurs in a particular climate unique to that particular time and place in history. Broido (2000) says that sexual orientation “is socially constructed as people make meaning of... sexual/romantic experiences, and place them in a social, cultural, political, and historical context.” So too, is the coming-out decision framed in this context.

As an example, consider Audre who explained in her interview that with at least one cultural community, she was very clear about what kind of environment she could expect were she to disclose her sexual orientation. She said, “Hispanic culture is condemning and shameful... it’s not ok to be out.”

In other interviews conducted, reflections on the environment often came in the form of a temporal reference. First, comparisons to the past, as in when Martina said,
“The world’s different now- my children are much more comfortable- and I admire it- as opposed to when I grew up- when we were soooo closeted- and I was utterly and completely terrified. If a woman looked at my wedding ring- I thought, don’t go there! Even though I would’ve liked to.”

References to the present environment, most especially the current political climate, were also expressed, as in when Audre offered, “It’s still a heterosexual white man’s world. There may be a black man in office, and there are more states that you can get married in... but we’re not there yet.”

There were also the predictions of future environmental concerns. Oscar warns that coming-out as a matter of practice can actually create a less hospitable environment for gay and lesbian people. He says, “Conditions have become clearer and more dangerous. [Our coming-out] tends to trigger more anxiety and fear in the dominant culture.”

Distressingly, to be gay or lesbian also means to acknowledge the very real threats of physical violence that exist in this country’s social fabric. Although perhaps not a specific factor for the gay or lesbian leader/influencer in their coming-out decision as it may apply to a client or organization, this reality of the larger societal background deserves mention. The evidence points to as recently as 2007 when there was a rise in violence against those perceived to be gay/lesbian/bisexual. The following is taken from the Human Rights Campaign report (2009), Research Overview: Hate Crimes and Violence Against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People:

Statistical information collected by the Federal Bureau of Investigation consistently shows that lesbian, gay and bisexual people, and those perceived to be LGB, are attacked more than heterosexuals... Since 1991, more than 100,000 hate crime offenses have been reported to the FBI. In 2007 alone, 1,265 LGB- biased hate crimes were reported to the FBI,... a 6-percent increase from
2006. Sexual orientation consistently ranks as the third-highest motivator for hate crime incidents. (p. 2)

On the flip side of the news front, with welcome statistical information, *The Corporate Equality Index for 2010*, published annually by the Human Rights Campaign, the nation's leading LGBT civil rights organization, gives us much hope in considering the overall workplace environment. It points out that 305 out of 590 of the nation's top 1,000 companies received a 100% ranking for having an inclusive work environment for LGBT employees. This is particularly powerful considering that when the report was first published in 2002, only 13 companies received a 100% ranking (Lott, 2009).

Like the preceding phases for the coming-out model, the *environment* for these stages is equally challenging to capture and define perfectly. And like the other phases, it cannot be separated from the rest of the system. As the maxim goes, “Dividing an elephant in half does not produce two small elephants.” (Senge, 1990)

**Implications & Future Research**

The coming-out decision for those gay men and lesbian women who are in positions of leadership and influence for organizational systems is complex and varied. Because it is a relatively new phenomenon that is being studied in the academic and business arenas, there is still much work to be done to fully understand the mechanics and forces that play into this very personal – and here professional – decision. As the body of research increases, however, and as the world moves through its social, political and cultural growing pains, a burgeoning desire for skills-building, comfort and trust with gay/lesbian colleagues, leaders, and those whose role is to influence organizations (for example, OD consultants) in the interactive workplace environment is occurring. As this
happens, it seems likely that the overall necessity, awareness and appreciation of the coming-out decision for organizational leaders/influencers will grow. Foldy and Creed (1999) wrote,

\[ \text{Change that takes on societal norms cannot happen unless organizations and individuals within that society challenge their own value systems. To arrive at the point where one is ready to challenge the traditional system, one has to have undergone some kind of transformation oneself. (p. 207)} \]

The appreciation of the ‘in or out’ decision as a system-process suggests that a systems-thinking analysis may serve future research on the coming-out decision for organizational leaders/influencers. Additionally there is enormous opportunity in considering the open-system coming-out model in OD practice when working with gay/lesbian leaders and their development. Understanding what encourages, blocks, and reinforces an individual in disclosing their sexual orientation gives the executive coach, the consultant, or the leadership student, critical insight into what makes a leader ‘tick.’ As Peter Senge advises in *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, “[L]ook for the systemic blocks that prevent individuals from speaking out. Look at the full range of formal and informal punishments for speaking frankly…” (p. 214). For the organizational leader, having those forces identified and named, and then working to harness and manage them, may be the developmental task that can move the gay/lesbian leader to their next level of effectiveness in their organizational influence… whether that decision is to be ‘in’ or ‘out.’

**Conclusion**

In Erving Goffman’s (1959) seminal work, *The Presentation of Self In Everyday Life*, the author explains the power and impact of an individual ‘role-playing’ and not being
authentic in their presentation of their ‘self’.

If this tendency of the audience...places the performer in a position to be misunderstood and makes it necessary for him to exercise excessive care regarding everything he does when before the audience, so also this...accepting tendency puts the audience in a position to be duped and misled. (p. 55)

Over fifty years later, our research interviewee Alexander reported a similar insight, when he said,

“If the real self is vastly different from the presentational self, that leads to problems in work relationships. It’s like playing a role as an actor. It demands certain things that draws on all your strengths and capabilities.”

Both Goffman and Alexander capture the closing sentiment of this research study: there is an energy that is expended, consumed, and transformed each time a gay or lesbian person makes the decision to hide or disclose their sexual orientation. This energy can prove especially depleting and/or nourishing for the gay/lesbian leader and the relationships with those whom s/he is leading or influencing. Using an open-system model however, a systems-approach can be utilized in understanding how the energy of this decision-making system is transformed. The same systems-thinking approach can be tapped for how to influence the system. As Peter Scholtes explains in The Leader’s Handbook (1998), “We develop a systems-mind...by pulling back and asking systemic questions about...the larger systems...We zoom in...and organize ourselves around those questions and the pursuit of those answers.” (p. 85) In other words, by thoroughly understanding the system and the critical components that can be managed and influenced (whether the input, process, output, feedback, or environment), it may be possible to identify the ‘pressure points’ in the system that can have the greatest impact in realizing the desired outcomes (i.e., to be ‘out’ or ‘closeted’).
Ultimately, in this researcher’s estimation, the best of all worlds will be one in which this very question of ‘in or out’ will no longer be relevant or interesting. There will be nothing to hide for the gay/lesbian person. It will be then that no energy is expended, consumed, or wasted in the organizational leadership world, because the gay or lesbian person will no longer be the ‘other’ in an organization. The energy that is devoted to this decision can be funneled instead to other goals, and other organizational/interpersonal systems.

As Eleanor said so powerfully as she closed her interview, “The beauty of not hiding anything... is not having anything to hide.”
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Sipress, D.. What I was wondering is, Doctor, can you make me straight during the week and gay on the weekends?. The New Yorker 7/2/2001.

Appendix A

Interview Subjects’ Profiles and Pseudonyms

1. **Oscar**, a 64-year-old white gay man, and current president of the largest member network for Organization Development professionals in the world.

2. **Harvey**, a 38-year-old gay man of Mexican-Filipino descent, Senior Project Manager for one of the largest combination natural gas and electric utilities in the United States and head of the company’s GLBT employee resource group.

3. **Alexander**, a 54-year-old Jewish gay man, retired supervisor, manager and board member from a multinational $36 billion corporation that designs and sells consumer electronics, networking and communications technology/services.

4. **Leonardo**, a 76-year-old white gay man, veteran, retired psychotherapist, clinical supervisor, and member of social and networking group for gay seniors.

5. **Eleanor**, a 54-year-old white lesbian woman, currently the Chief of Police for a town of 12,000 in Sonoma County, CA, the first woman to head a police department in the county and only the fifth female Chief of Police in the state.

6. **Virginia**, a 69-year-old white lesbian woman, retired Director of The Pastoral Life Services Department, a major leadership role in the Catholic Church, and an ex-Catholic nun.

7. **Martina**, a 72-year-old white lesbian woman and retired external Organization Development consultant.

8. **Audre**, a 45-year-old white lesbian woman, current division manager and supervisor for a $3 million multi-county human services nonprofit in northern California.
Appendix B

Document of Interview Questions Shared with Interviewees

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MA in Psychology and Organization Development
Culminating Research Project

Guiding question for research...

*What factors lead a gay or lesbian organizational leader/influencer to intentionally disclose their sexual orientation (or not) and how is their organizational leadership and influence impacted as a result of that decision?*

Interview Questions:

1. In your professional life, when have you intentionally decided to “come-out” (or not)?

2. How did you decide this? What questions/ factors/ assumptions did you consider? Have those changed over time?

3. What exactly do you decide to do and/or not do? (*e.g., Were you explicit with others? Was there particular language that you utilized... or avoided?*)

4. What would have to be true for you to make the opposite choice?

5. What do you believe was the impact on your “leadership effectiveness” given your professional coming-out decision?

6. What other aspects of your identity influenced, or continue to influence, your professional coming-out decisions? (*e.g., your religion, ethnicity, physical ability, culture, gender role, etc.*)

7. What do you “hold to be true” about gay/lesbian people in similar leadership roles who are faced with the choice of coming-out or not? (*i.e., What is your philosophical stance on this issue?*)

8. What advice might you give others in a similar position/role as yours?