

# 5 Things NOT to Say to Transgender People



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While research suggests that only two in 10 people personally know someone who identifies as transgender, the reality is that the increase in visibility for people who are trans has created a need to know more about what it means to be transgender. In the workplace, this evolution of visibility also means that D&I practitioners are striving to better understand what it means to be supportive of (or even better, an ally to) people who are trans-identified.

The effort isn't without challenges, however. Jean-Marie Navetta, the author of the guide to being a trans ally, a publication from her Straight for Equality project, offers five examples of what not to say to trans colleagues ... and, even better, five things you should be doing to express support and inclusion.

## Things NOT to Say to Transgender People

**1 “So ... what surgeries have you had?”**  
Granted, there's a lot of curiosity about the medical treatments and procedures that people who are trans may use. However, this question — like any question about medical procedures at work — is completely off-limits. First, this is a disrespectful violation of privacy, and would be no more appropriate than asking about medical care of a person who is cisgender (meaning not trans-identified). Second, it assumes that medical procedures are a “requirement” for being trans. They are not. Not all people who are trans-identified will go through medical treatments. But that doesn't mean that those people are less trans than those who do. Statistically speaking, people who are trans have alarmingly less access to healthcare that will provide all of the benefits that they require should they want to embark on medical interventions as part of their transition.

**What to do instead?** Find out what trans-related health benefits your organization offers, and ensure that they are as comprehensive as possible. For more information on what those benefits should include, check out the Human Rights Campaign's Corporate Equality Index. And if something's missing, then be the person to advocate for benefit — and policy — change.

## 2 “You know, you’d pass even better if you would just [fill in the blank with your appearance advice here].”

On the surface, this might not seem horrible, but if you look deeper, there's a lot of negative stuff going on. At the surface, it is a grown-up version of gender policing, or reinforcing stereotypes of what men and women “should” look like. And at a deeper level, there's a message being sent here that the trans individual can “do better” in how they present themselves if they'd just conform to your concept of gender.



Can I see a picture of what you used to look like?

**What to do instead?** Mind your own words and messages about gender stereotypes at all times. Be aware of when you're judging someone because of how they express their gender, whether they're trans or not. Put yourself in check when you're wandering into stereotypes, and when you hear it from someone else, interrupt it.

## 3 “Can I see a picture of what you used to look like?” or “What was your name before you transitioned?”

Again, curiosity is natural. But just because you're curious about something doesn't necessarily mean that you are owed an answer. When these questions are asked, they can disclose people as trans, forcing an acknowledgement of transition and potentially violating privacy. Such questions also imply that people who are trans have had two lives: Who they used to be and who they are today, suggesting inauthenticity. Worst of all, questions like this may force people who are trans to discuss a time that was possibly painful and private for them; people deserve better.

**What to do instead?** Take a cue from what you learned in school: Close your mouth and open your ears (and minds). While not every person who is trans will share their stories, being the ally who is receptive and always ready to listen makes you an invaluable friend, one who is always ready to hear about their experiences and how,

potentially, you can be more supportive. Want to learn more about the transitioning process in general and find some powerful stories? Pick up a copy of *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves* today.

## 4 “Can't you just use the gender-neutral restroom?”

The loo remains one of the biggest points of stress for many, especially at work and in public venues. And while relegating a person who is trans to a gender-neutral facility may seem like a quick solution, it can actually create damage. First, it flies in the face of accepting people based on their gender identity, and forces them out of the facility they have the right to use creating a separate and unequal proposition. Further, a ruling from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) in April clarified that denying transgender people access to restrooms that correspond with their gender identity violates federal sex discrimination law — so it isn't just exclusionary, but also deemed illegal. Second, it continues to call out the individual as different from other employees, and this is hardly the trademark of inclusion.



**What to do instead?** Ensure that your organization has plans in place for when an employee indicates that they will transition. It should include items such as restroom and gender-segregated facility usage and a timeline for when usage will go into effect, as well as clarity on how to respond should other employees push back. Bear this in mind

for other sex-segregated areas at work, such as locker rooms or changing spaces.

## 5 “You're trans!?! So do you know Caitlyn Jenner/Laverne Cox/Janet Mock/Chaz Bono?”

While, statistically speaking, the trans community seems small, it doesn't mean that everyone is personally connected. The chance that your newly disclosed trans colleague knows Laverne Cox is about as good a chance that your African American colleague personally knows Beyoncé or your gay colleague knows Neil Patrick Harris. There's much more diversity to the trans community than is portrayed in the media. When we miss these stories that are less visible, we miss tremendous opportunities to learn how to be more inclusive.

**What to do instead?** Learn more about the remarkable history of the trans community and the phenomenal diversity it represents. Books like *Transgender History* by Susan Stryker and *Transgender Warriors* by Leslie Feinberg are fantastic starting places.