



**AIR FORCE DIVERSITY GUIDE:  
GUIDANCE FOR COMMANDERS AND  
MANAGERS OF LESBIAN, GAY  
AND BISEXUAL MEMBERS**

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**AIR FORCE**



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# Supporting Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual members of the Air Force

Managing or commanding an Air Force member who identifies as LGB should, in theory, be no different to any other Air Force member. However, as can be seen from the previous parts of this guide, there are certain areas in which a little understanding and care can have a great impact for these members.

## The Commander's impact

A Commander or a Manager has a powerful role in setting the tone and defining the degree of inclusion within your team. Your leadership and attitude towards LGB members will have a strong impact on whether LGB members feel they can be themselves in the workplace, and how others treat them. LGB members who have to hide their sexual orientation are not performing at their best, because they need spend a significant amount of their available capacity hiding this aspect about themselves. Spending time ensuring a moderate workplace that encourages everyone to be themselves allows the Air Force to capitalise on the strengths of all individuals and reduces the likelihood that you will need to deal with unacceptable behaviour within your unit.

Managing or commanding a gay or lesbian member may seem a daunting experience for a supervisor or commander, influenced by either personally held beliefs, a lack of understanding or awareness of the issues, or in some cases, minimal understanding or experience with gay or lesbian people. However, it is important to treat LGB members the same as any other Air Force member under your command, regardless of sexuality. There is support available to commanders and supervisors - please see the support available section of this guide.

## Harassment and Bullying

Anti-gay attitudes and harassment is one of the most pervasive, frightening, and potentially damaging threats members can face. If a member is being bullied, called names, threatened, or physically harmed at their workplace because of their sexual orientation, it is a command responsibility to act to stop the harassment and rectify the situation. If the Chain of Command (CoC) does not do anything to protect the member, they can be held liable.

The impact harassment can have on members should not be underestimated; it has the potential to effect the member both personally and professionally. As one airman reflects, a time on overhearing two colleagues making derogatory remarks about his sexuality:

*'This was the point that I felt I had lost the fight for Equality within my Squadron. I started contemplating leaving the RAAF. I started participating in self destructive activities (such as binge drinking) and my self-esteem was broken. Although I had to stay at the SQN, I lost my spark and my drive to be at work or participate in SQN activities. I never wanted to be around anyone and I became recluse'.*

Allowing inappropriate jokes, attitudes or comments which marginalise LGB persons is equally damaging to an inclusive workplace culture, especially considering that its very difficult to know whether there is an LGB person within the unit or not. If an LGB person has made a decision to not be out, it's very unlikely they will come forward to report unacceptable behaviour.

***The member's colleagues, supervisors, chain of command or anyone in their workplace does NOT have the right to "out" someone without the affected member's permission. This can have tragic and dire consequences. Threatening to disclose private information violates a member's right to privacy.***

*'One of my so called close friends betrayed me by outing me to all of the Squadron. Slowly but surely I became the "butt of all jokes" and was not only ridiculed daily but I heard some of the most disgusting and downgrading things said about me and my sexuality. It was terrifying, I didn't know who I could talk to at the Squadron, everybody I knew was from the Squadron so I didn't feel I could talk to them as my trust had already been broken once. I was so scared that I wouldn't even talk to medical staff or the chaplains about it... I just went on day by day hating the thought of going to work, having to put up with all the crass remarks and name calling'.*

## Moving beyond assumptions to an inclusive workplace

We all make assumptions and rely on stereotypes in most aspects of our lives; it's the mechanism the brain uses to expedite the processing of information. However, these assumption and stereotypes can be hurtful to people, when you incorrectly assume something about them.

Heterosexual people "display" their sexual orientation, often unconsciously. Displays may include openly talking about their wife/husband/boyfriend etc, displaying photographs of their partner on their desk, bringing their partner to the Mess for work/social events and actively taking advantage of the support offered to families of ADF personnel. It is often assumed someone is married to a person of the opposite gender; members are usually asked about their family situation during initial conversations in every workplace. This can make LGB members feel extremely uncomfortable and reinforce to them the need to hide their same-sex attraction.

If an LGB member feels the need to hide their orientation, they also need to hide any evidence of a partner. If someone is being evasive regarding details about their personal life, they may not be comfortable coming out. It is important to recognise when someone is being evasive and check whether your behaviour might be creating an environment where an LGB member feels they can't be themselves.

*'I went through my initial recruit and employment training feeling quite alone. I remember thinking that there must not be anyone else in the RAAF or wider Defence Force who was gay. I thought I was the only one, I felt so alone and afraid of what the other members would think'.*

## What you can do to help

Listed below are some ways Commanders and all members can begin to identify and change the way they approach situations and phrase conversation, to avoid incorrectly assuming member's personal circumstances.

**Think about how you frame your personal questions and statements.** Social interactions and developing friendships with our peers is what makes our organisation such a fantastic place to work. However, try to think about your own automatic assumptions, before asking a personal question. For example, in a conversation with a new colleague or staff member, asking if they have a 'partner' is a more assumption-free question than asking if they are 'married'. And if they do have a partner, you might ask 'what do they do for a living' instead of automatically assuming the partner is of the opposite sex. This applies to a range of social scenarios – try to think before you ask!

**Let others volunteer personal information.** This point relates to the previous point; sometimes even fairly innocent questions might hurt, offend or alienate. For example, asking

somebody 'how old are your kids?', 'or do you have kids?' are not normally hurtful questions, but they may be distressing to a member who has been trying to become a parent through assisted fertility or adoption. Work-based friendships are obviously based on getting to know somebody at a personal level, but sometimes it may be wise to wait until personal information is given voluntarily, instead of asking. Again – think before you ask.

**Check to make sure any planned social activities are not based on assumptions.** Social activities, such as a 'meet-and-great' BBQ for the 'wives' to meet each-other, clearly assumes that a) all partners must be women and b) that all members must be married! Check to make sure that any planned social activities and invitations to activities encompass members/families who may not fit into your assumed construct of a 'typical' family.

**Check lesson plans and instructor guides to ensure training scenarios encompass a range of different family/life scenarios.** To educate others that there are many different types of people, families and lifestyles in the Air Force, instructional staff should endeavour to make sure that they aren't perpetuating any assumptions when designing training packages at all levels of training. Commanders might consider asking their training staff to run an 'assumption check' to ensure there is a balanced approach taken in all areas of our training.

**Remind personnel about their own assumptions in the workplace.** If you notice other members of staff are expressing assumptions that may alienate some staff, speak up and try to guide others regarding how their assumptions may be impacting others. Often people may be quite unaware of how their statements, questions and activities may serve to alienate and offend their co-workers/team-members/staff.



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