

An Intimate Conversation with Black/African American LGBTQ+ Women & Allies

Moderated by **Deneen L. Garrett** (Corporate Ally)

AT&T

Panelists

Tonia Williams-Neely (Gay)

John Deere

Chavonne Hodges (Bi-Sexual, Lesbian)

AT&T

Jazmine Williams (Corporate Ally)

Quicken Loans

Erica Monique Evans (Transgender, Ally)

Wells Fargo

Janet Marzett (Corporate Ally, Executive Sponsor)

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The Panel

- In 2018, our Annual panel discussion (*featuring new panelists and led by an Ally*) included an all Black/African-American dais of corporate women who are directly apart of, or impact the LGBTQ+ community; Gay/Bi/Trans/Hetero Ally representation who create LGBTQ+ strategies at their respective companies.
- The intention and desire was to be *intimate & candid* in discussion – speaking to a crowd that wanted to learn about the personal experiences of “OUT” individuals navigating the ‘corporate world’, as well as, hearing from those who support Diversity & Inclusion and true authenticity within the workplace.
- The audience learned about their collection of experiences in the workplace, and the Intersectionality of being Black/female/LGBTQ+. We discussed strategies and initiatives related to LGBTQ+ employees.



Tonia Williams-Neely, IT Team Leader – Cyber Security, John Deere (Gay)

When you started at John Deere, you were “who you are”, Tonia. As a gay/lesbian woman what did this mean? Being a woman of color in IT (at the time, a white male-dominated functional area), I already had a lot of ‘otherness’. I couldn’t hide my gender or my race; however, hiding my sexual orientation would have been a choice that was available to me. I didn’t necessarily make a choice to come out to my co-workers; I simply chose not to be closeted. In my opinion, this is like being heterosexual. They don’t come out. They get to go to work and just be themselves. I was doing the same thing.

How did you become the past chair of Rainbow, ERG? Succession planning. I joined the group as a regular member shortly after they formed in 2011. I then went on to join the steering team. From there, I was asked to serve as vice chair under the agreement that the vice chair would move on to the chair position. That arrangement is still in place and allows a better transition from outgoing to incoming chair.

Tell us about the policy work you and your team did. I’m pretty sure our ERG knew from the very beginning that we couldn’t afford to just be an ‘affinity’ ERG focusing social events. In order to build our membership, people had to be comfortable joining the LGBT ERG. In order for employees to feel comfortable joining the ERG, we had to ensure certain protections were in place and/or made clear.



Tonia Williams-Neely, IT Team Leader – Cyber Security, John Deere (Gay)

Some of the things we focused on were health benefits/coverage for transgender employees, adding gender expression and identity to our code of business conduct; changes to the SMART dress policy.

Which has had the most impact on your experience in the workplace, being Black, a woman or being in the LGBTQ+ community? Please expound.
Definitely being black. For me, it is harder to navigate the John Deere culture with the visible traits. There are plenty of women walking around now, but I very rarely see women of color. I was more paranoid or anxious about changing my hair and wearing my hair natural than I have been about anything else in my 18 year career. There is one other black woman and 3 black males in my entire building (~300+ people)

What advice would you give to someone having difficulty navigating the workplace as a Black, Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Transgender, Queer person? My advice is to just be yourself....in it's most professional form. Trying to assimilate and/or exclude elements of your personal life from your day-to-day work life can be stressful. Work is stressful enough without having to remember pronouns or in some way disguising what you did over the weekend.



Tonia Williams-Neely, IT Team Leader – Cyber Security, John Deere (Gay)

Please share 1 major initiative/program for LGBTQ+ at your company you are most proud of. Why? What has been the impact? Benefits for transgender employees. I'm most proud of this because we were initially told that it could not be done. Our former chair (Kris) really drove this and blanketed senior leadership with facts. We presented the leadership team with data that almost forced them to take another look. I'm excited about the upcoming addition of self-ID in our employee engagement surveys. It's yet to be determined what will be done with the measures; however, I'm hoping that this leads to the addition of recruiting at LGBT events and career fairs.



Chavonne M. Hodges-Horton, Outside Plant Planning (OSP) Engineering Assistant, AT&T, LGBTQ+ LEAGUE Board: Local President, and LEAGUE National Program Director (Lesbian/Bi-Sexual)

When you started with AT&T 30 years ago, you were “in the closet”. Tell us about those early years. Were you “out” to family & friends? Yes, I was in the closet. I didn’t share my intimate lifestyle with my peers, at work during the early years. It wasn’t in an open or safe place, to share who you were really dating. It was assumed that if you were single, you were dating in a heterosexual relationship. My family and friends were aware, and knew about my dating women since I was sixteen years old, while in high school. It wasn’t an open conversation, but a known fact, that I was always with a women. Until I felt like I wanted to try, and live a NORMAL life, at the age of 29 and married at 31 years old, like others who were in a heterosexual relationship for the sake of the family.

You’ve been with your wife Brandee for 9 years. Did you come out at work before or after meeting Brandee? Yes, I came out at work, after my four year heterosexual marriage, then a divorce at age 35 years old. Years later, when I was in a relationship with a co-worker in my office. 14 years my junior, it was obvious, that I was in a lesbian relationship, so it was a non-spoken gesture. I didn’t have to say a word, but my actions verified, to my peers, their thoughts about who I was dating, which was a women. I had come out and was accepted by my peers,



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during that timeframe of that relationship. I wasn't afraid of what people thought of me anymore. I was getting used to being out of closet. Wearing the title Lesbian proudly at work, and with family and friends more openly.

At what level of outness did you start your work with LEAGUE?

I had been married two years to Brandee, and I was finally being my authentic self at home, work, family and friends openly. Admitting to myself that I was gay, a lesbian, who was bi-sexual, because I married and was in a heterosexual relationship. It didn't last, because I was being true to myself. Making other people, my family happy, and I was miserable. Being a part of LEAGUE, empowered me to voice my opinions, listen, and learn from others. Making it inviting to peers at the workplace, that it was okay to a Lesbian, and still do my job in a professional manner. I wanted to participate in LEAGUE, to help others have a voice, and true identity. LEAGUE offered a place to by YOURSELF, volunteer, encourage, and motivate others, to help serve the LGBTQ community.



Chavonne M. Hodges-Horton, Outside Plant Planning (OSP) Engineering Assistant, AT&T, LGBTQ+ LEAGUE Board: Local President, and LEAGUE National Program Director (Lesbian/Bi-Sexual)

Which has had the most impact on your experience in the workplace, being Black, a woman or being in the LGBTQ+ community? Please expound. All three have been a TRIPLE delight. It's what people see first, when I walk into a room: Black, Women, who is a Lesbian. That there are smart women in Engineering, who work with majority all white male, or men in general. As a women, who adds something to the table, as a problem solver, innovative, creative and willingness to learn technology, is a positive attribute. Being a Lesbian, is the icing on the cake. Allowing me to share, encourage, motivate, and enlighten others about LGBTQ issues.

What advice would you give to someone having difficulty navigating the workplace as a Black, Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Transgender, Queer person? Seek assistance from your immediate Supervisor, Mentor, Sponsor, and or ERG group, to get current information, websites or links, reading material, or documents, and/or talk to someone in HR, who can guide you through, uncomfortable situations at work, concerning all types of LGBTQ issues.

Please share 1 major initiative/program for LGBTQ+ at your company you are most proud of. Why? What has been the impact? The TREVOR PROJECT is an LGBTQ major program, allowing 100 LEAGUE/ERG members, and allies to be a part of the solution,



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in saving the lives of our future generations, through digital counseling for suicidal LGBTQ youth. AT&T has invested 1M dollars toward, the proper care and concerns, of the LGBTQ young adult's future. It shows me that AT&T has compassion, and are willing to help put a stop to the high numbers of suicide. The hours of volunteering for AT&T will have a great impact, so we can serve the youth with excellence, and lead them to seeing a brighter future, for themselves.

Why is it so hard for women to come Out or let others in, in the workplace?

The trust levels in offices, have negative or unconscious biases. People and peers in the office, think that if you are a Lesbian, you want to come on, to every women in the department. This is a myth, it's not true, but it's fear of the unknown. So you put up a shield, and isolate yourself from people, because you don't want your personal self, to be judged, on what you can do, in the office professionally.

What impact do you think Land O Lakes new LGBTQ, woman CEO will have on other women coming Out or letting others in? Great impact! To see that a Lesbian has broken the corporate ceiling, who is open, says a lot to other executives, and that maybe, they can be free, to express themselves more directly on a higher level in corporate America. My plan is to see more women of color, being true to themselves, and one day become the CEO to share my story with others my fears, failures, and FAITH in corporate American, where I work, live and play.



Jazmine Williams, Program Manager for Diversity & Inclusion, Quicken Loans (Ally)

Your background in higher education exposed you to the human experience. How does this translate to the work you currently do?

*One thing I learned quickly working with students is that everyone's 'Normal' is different. The things we grew up with, beliefs, practices, our understanding of the world- our norms- all differ wildly, but we are taught that **we** are normal and anyone different from us is strange or wrong. This is often the cusp of where misunderstandings about diversity come in. We judge other people's behavior based on our personal experiences and surroundings. Because we live in a segregated society we also have confirmation bias that our 'norm' is everyone's normal. That our truth is everyone's truth. Understating this helps when working with team members in training and one on one. It reminds me to slow down, give the why, provide history, context, and proof and to be patient.*



QL is in the process of creating Team Member Resource Networks (TMRNs). What are TMRNs? Who is driving this (employees)? Why?

TMRNs are volunteer, team member led and created, groups that serve as an opportunity for communication, collaboration and connectivity among team members across the Family of Companies. . TMRNs are created and joined by team members who seek community around a

Jazmine Williams, Program Manager for Diversity & Inclusion, Quicken Loans (Ally)

experience or identity with the goal of supporting each other and working together to impact the social and cultural climate at QL FOC outside of work-related tasks. The driver behind TMRNs are team members. While D&I manages the TMRNs we only provide general oversight. Our program is unique because we do not personally select or employ the leaders. Instead TM submit an application to create a TMRN and that includes the 3 other TMs volunteering to serve on the board and an executive advisor who has volunteered. They create the name and mission, they run the show. The reason we use this model is it provides team members an opportunity for professional development that is hard to come by at most places. If you are interested in leadership there's no opportunity to try it out without jumping in head 1st. this is a toe dip into leadership



D&I is less than 2 years old and your LGBTQ+ TN is in process. How were/are LGBTQ+ employees supported prior to now?

This answer may change as I need to do some research- I'm a fairly new team member, my 2 year anniversary with the company is on Halloween, so I lack the historical knowledge to speak to this completely. However, I do know the D&I team was formed by

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a group of team members who met weekly for a few years. They pushed forward the need for a person to focus on D&I full time. That position was posted and filled in 2016, our team was formed 2017. Because we are so new we don't have any formalized programs for all team members. Instead each area of the business and team created individual programs and informal groups.

What advice would you give to someone having difficulty navigating the workplace as a Black, Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Transgender, Queer person? *Put yourself first. Marginalized people tend to question their own experiences and intuition. I'm big on self-reflection. It's important to check yourself as sometimes, particularly when we have experienced trauma around an identity, we come in with our guard up and see things through that lens, however that is the expectation, not the norm. We have experienced enough to know when something isn't right. So we need to listen to ourselves and our feelings and make decisions that are best for our wellbeing. Sometimes that is confronting a situation even if you hate confrontation, sometimes it's moving roles and sometimes,*



Jazmine Williams, Program Manager for Diversity & Inclusion, Quicken Loans (Ally)

, as it has been once for me in the past, it's leaving a position and putting faith in your own abilities that you will find what is for you. The thing not to do- shrink or hide yourself. I will recognize that my advice is coming from a place of privilege and that not everyone can walk away from a job that pays the bills, but find your peace in the best way you can.

Please share 1 major initiative/program for LGBTQ+ at your company you are most proud of. Why? What has been the impact? *Team Member Resource Networks. Our LGBT TMRN is one of our largest and had 152 members within the 1st week of announcing. Since their inception by a group of really dedicated team members we have been able to participate in Pride in 3 different states, reconsider some of the trainings and programs we currently offer and create a space for team members to come together around, not just identity but additional interest (there's a dungeon and dragons sub team)*

Why is it so hard for women to come Out or let others in, in the workplace? *Women are already marginalized, why you would want to welcome more stigma? This depends on the culture and social climate at a company, however as marginalized people we learn to sit and listen before opening up. While others*



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that in a new environment. Instead we wait and listen and watch for cues about the unadvertised company culture to see if it's safe. Keeping in mind that LGBT is not a protected class, that you can be fired in several states if it is found that you aren't straight, that alone will cause you to pause and/or cover.



Listen. While sometimes our instinct, when working with marginalized groups, is to jump right into problem solving and building solutions, the group itself often has the answers about what is needed, we just need to listen. This means not only listening, but providing marginalized people with the space to be heard, i.e. when in the process of finding solutions to better serve marginalized employees or clients make sure you are including those groups in the conversation. Give up some of your own space to speak to someone from that group, particularly when you see they are not being heard, and listen quietly. Our ability to not interject, attempt to translate (“*I think what she means is*”), and interrupt is often the answer to engaging. Though this question is about black women everything mentioned can be used when working with any marginalized group.

Challenge and push. People are often hesitant to challenge things at work, but change doesn't happen when everyone puts their head down. If you honestly want to see change



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you have to challenge the current processes and policies put in place. This doesn't have to be protest or disruption, this can be done by simply asking "why". *Why do we have this policy? Why is this process this way?* Sometimes the answer makes sense and the next step is encouraging that the 'why' is shared. Sometimes there is no answer and that is the place where change can happen. If there is no good reason why a policy or procedure is in place and that policy or procedure creates hardship to certain groups then it is easy to now argue that it needs to be changed.



Erica Monique Evans, Transaction Coordinator, Wells Fargo (Transgender, Ally)

You started your career as a “gay man” which was not surprising to anyone especially family and friends and worked at various companies. Tell us about those experiences. Yes, it’s true – I’ve worked at various companies, some would say prestigious corporations. What’s not true, I’ve never defined or identified myself at any point as a “gay man”. I never had the luxury of trying to ‘figure it out’ as some folks do – I was simply living life. I wasn’t flamboyant in mannerisms, but my clothing always had flair and I used them to fully express myself. But there was a point when I began to experiment with acrylic nails and different hairstyles...I was on the cusp of transitioning.

When you decided to present as your “authentic self”. Share how you left work on Friday as “Michael” and showed up Monday as “Monique”;

I honestly don’t remember my thought process behind choosing the name Monique – but I do recall thinking to myself afterwards how much it resembles my mom’s name, Marilyn. My process was an evolution; of course there was cross dressing in my teenage years – wearing cute outfits when I would hang out with friends.

But my true transition occurred in the fall of 2006 – I had just gotten laid off from Chase. My mom encouraged me to wait until after I found a new job and then transition, but I was insistent on presenting myself as I desired and prepared myself to be rejected.



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I remember the call I had to make to my mom and granny – I'm from Ohio, but reside in Texas. I wanted to give them a heads up before my visit... granny hates surprises. It hasn't been easy – one job made me use a bathroom in the basement after a complaint from me using the general women's washroom on the 10th floor where I worked.

Other than not wanting to mess up your nails, what prompted the transition? It just felt like the right move to make – I was already heading in that direction. And once my best friend (*also transgender*) from Ohio moved to Texas it was an easy decision! It may seem rapid in retrospect but my life had lead me to that point. Over the course of a weekend, I threw out all of my 'guy' clothes and shopped for female attire. My primary difficulty was finding the right Doctor. Hormone replacement therapy was my next step and many physicians (*in my case an Endocrinologist*) were not familiar with someone transitioning; at least at that time. But we've come a long way with our understanding as a society and also the medical field.

Which has had the most impact on your experience in the workplace, being



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being Black, a woman or being in the LGBTQ+ community? Please expound. When I consider it, I'd say being black – it's the dominating lens with which I see the world based on my experience within it. Yes, there's intersectionality – but my whole thought process is shaped by first being a black person in America. It has determined my actions, and inactions – and it's the first thing that people see and respond to; and it's been used as a tool for preconceived notions that fuel stereotypes.

What advice would you give to someone having difficulty navigating the workplace as a Black, Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Transgender, Queer person? Be true to yourself – don't cower down in order to 'fit in'; when you're in the right place, the reward is people respond to your authenticity. You also have to leverage your resources – allies, ERGs, and HR (if needed). When you're steadfast in who you, it will either draw people to you or push them away... and as long as they're not in a position that can affect your job, then it's okay. Not everyone will want to understand you, your circumstance or what you represent. But the key aspect to life is seeking love and validation from yourself first, and refusing to compromise your happiness!



Erica Monique Evans, Transaction Coordinator, Wells Fargo (Transgender, Ally)

Please share 1 major initiative/program for LGBTQ+ at your company you are most proud of. Why? What has been the impact? This year (2018), Wells Fargo (on the Enterprise Leadership Team level) has not only created a role for a Transgender Engagement Chair, but has also created a Transgender/ Gender Fluid Advisory Council to support the chairperson. I am an Advisor on this Council.

Why is it so hard for women to come Out or let others in, in the workplace? Because in the workplace, we're grappling with how much vulnerability is okay to demonstrate – women in the workplace are still held to certain standards and stereotypes. The same can be said of men, but the ones attributed to women are perceived as negative. This plays into most women not negotiating their salaries, reluctance to speak up or acknowledge workplace issues for the sake of not wanting to appear as 'difficult'. So add to all of that gender identity questions or sexuality that doesn't fall in line with the norm, and many workplaces aren't able to handle that – so people are suffering in silence or not being true to themselves for fear of being seen and/ or treated unfairly.



Erica Monique Evans, Transaction Coordinator, Wells Fargo (Transgender, Ally)

What impact do you think Land O Lakes new LGBTQ, woman CEO will have on other women coming Out or letting others in? I think it's phenomenal, and more representation is needed. But the main aspect to remember is that qualifications, skill, and education is the determining factor to get the job done but when you have an interesting world view, or lens of the world that differs from the 'norm', that's an added bonus to what you bring to the table! Sexuality and Identity are not reasons to hire someone specifically, rather they are another piece in the fabric that makes a person whom they are – and when a person is authentic in who they are, we can celebrate them wholeheartedly.



Continue to recognize the broader aspect of womanhood.
Continue to recognize the broader aspect of Women of Color.

.....I assume or it seems like most folks think 'women of color' as being cis gender black females... but the greater objective is to expand their minds, shine a light to the broader horizon and acknowledge the many aspects of intersectionality.



Janet Marzett, VP of Finance, Mercedes Benz Financial, Corporate Ally & Executive Sponsor

Why is it so hard for women to come Out or let others in, in the workplace? Many times, women and women of color are conscious of the stereotypes of working with women. These stereotypes at times are not easy to dispel. Adding another layer of exposing their sexual identify/orientation can be viewed yet another challenge. While women in this community have no choice but to work through their own visible images of diversity, disclosing their sexual identity/orientation is one element that they can control. If the environment is not one that is open and safe, it is much harder to come out and allow others in. The risks of not being accepted, valued and fully integrated into the workplace is a risk that many are not willing to take. The assurance that ALL people are encouraged and supported to advance to their maximum potential will inspire women to come out and let others in.

What impact do you think Land O Lakes new LGBTQ, woman CEO will have on other women coming Out or letting others in? Many people in the LGBTQ community are inspired to see the first openly gay women in a Fortune 500 company. The appointment of Beth Fortune to this position not only tells but shows others what is possible to achieve.



Deneen L. Garrett, Senior Manager (Lead Consultant-Diversity), AT&T, Corporate Ally



Ask questions for understanding.

Listen to learn.

Advocate by using your voice when others are not being heard.

BE THE DIFFERENCE!!!

AT&T Diversity & Inclusion

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