



# **Where the Margins Meet the Corner Office:**

## **Five Leadership Insights From Transgender and Nonbinary Executives**

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With few exceptions, the executive tiers of the Fortune 500 and major public sector workplaces have not included transgender and nonbinary leaders.<sup>1</sup> Out & Equal seeks to change that and support major employers in leveraging the full talents of the LGBTQ+ workforce.

Over the last two decades, major businesses have outpaced lawmakers in setting up greater LGBTQ+ equity and inclusion in their workplaces—all as part of broader strategic initiatives to stay competitive and innovative.<sup>2</sup> For example, by the time the Supreme Court handed down its 2020 *Bostock* decision clarifying Title VII protections on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation, the majority of the Fortune 500 (91%) had long implemented gender identity and sexual orientation-based non-discrimination protections, equal spousal and partner benefits (53%), and transgender-inclusive benefits (65%).<sup>3</sup>

As vital as these efforts are, they are not sufficient as organizations seek to leverage the full depth and breadth of LGBTQ+ leadership, specifically trans and nonbinary talent. To support individual trans and nonbinary leaders in their career journeys and employers in their adoption of inclusion and belonging best practices, Out & Equal has a defined body of work to promote LGBTQ+ and, specifically, transgender and nonbinary executive leadership.



Out & Equal's 2023 research report, *Experiences of the Lavender Ceiling: Progress and Continued Challenges Facing Out LGBTQ+ Leaders at Work*, surfaced unique challenges and opportunities of trans and nonbinary career acceleration and leadership.

- Trans LGBTQ+ respondents were much more likely than cisgender respondents to report worse relationships after coming out at work (14% vs. 4%).
- LGBTQ+ leaders were also nearly twice as likely to face the expectation that they speak on behalf of everyone who holds one or more identities.
- 43% of all transgender respondents reported personally experiencing discrimination due to their gender identity or expression.
- 71% of transgender respondents noted gender identity and expression as the primary source of bias they have experienced in the workplace compared to 15% of cisgender respondents.

Launched in 2022, Out & Equal's Transgender and Nonbinary Executive Leadership Circle (TNBELC) brings together C-Suite and executive leaders from major public and private sector workplaces to:

- Convene in community with one another;
- Share experiential knowledge and career insights; and
- Shape the resources, tools, and programming we develop to nurture true workplaces of belonging in which all leaders can thrive.

The following insights are culled from focus groups and interviews conducted in 2023 and most recently in February 2024, a timeframe that includes the worst year on record for anti-transgender state legislation introduced and passed into law in the United States.<sup>4</sup>

From structural barriers to explicit and implicit bias, workplaces are far from fully benefiting from the richness that trans and nonbinary leaders have to offer. At the same time, those unique trans and nonbinary executives who have made it to the top bring to bear the unique perspectives of marginalized identities with core executive acumen. Trans and nonbinary executives are, therefore, among those most equipped to advise on the reflection, evolution, and leadership frameworks workplaces need to weather the moment we are in, both in the US and globally. From pandemics to hybrid work to generational differences to international conflict, businesses and public sector organizations need a new playbook for change.



## It's lonely at the top. Transgender and nonbinary executive experiences highlight the need for innovative talent development strategies.

"Rare." One of the first responses to the open question, "What comes to mind when you hear the phrase 'trans or nonbinary executives?'"

The current state of visible trans and nonbinary executives is still one of "firsts." As lonely and challenging as it is to be a party of one, this initial response was quickly followed by "trailblazers" and "magical." Trans and nonbinary executives—those rare individuals who have made it to the top—have rich experiential knowledge to offer all executives and changemakers. Among those who have made headlines for reaching this highest corporate echelon include Sue Nabi and Martine Rothblatt.<sup>5</sup>

Major employers rely heavily on mentorship programs to promote underrepresented or overlooked talent. In *Experiences of the Lavender Ceiling: Progress and Continued Challenges Facing Out LGBTQ+ Leaders at Work*, Out & Equal found that of more than 60% of respondents reporting their company or organization has mentorship programs, only 10% have an LGBTQ+-specific mentorship program.<sup>6</sup>

*"Honestly, outside of this group, I don't have a network of trans and nonbinary executives."*

Given the lack of trans and nonbinary executives in the workplace, it is highly unlikely that a transgender or nonbinary person will have the chance to be mentored by someone who shares this core identity. Early insights from the TNBELC suggest that cultivating successive leadership of trans and nonbinary individuals means rapidly evolving mentorship programs to focus on champions, or "sponsors," a lesson relevant to promoting other diverse

segments of would-be executives. While a mentor provides guidance on navigating one's career and is often a sounding board for discussing challenges (including those related to one's identities), a champion or sponsor is a senior leader who uses their influence to help another obtain high visibility assignments, promotions, or jobs.<sup>7</sup>

*"The person who was supposed to give this title to me did not want to, and it took people who I know who are senior leaders who have a voice to speak for me. It was like maybe six or seven phone calls before this individual actually gave me the job that I do so well. And I was like, if it's this hard for me, how hard is it going to be for everyone else who is right at the top and cannot cross that edge?"*

It is important for companies to recognize the unique position trans and nonbinary leaders often find themselves in as pioneers within their work environments. To address this, organizations can implement inclusive advisory and allyship initiatives that engage a broader range of staff and external partners to meet the needs of these individuals. This dynamic approach will help create a more inclusive and supportive atmosphere for transgender and nonbinary individuals as they continue to create value for the company, contribute to the rich diversity of workplace culture, and thrive in their roles and on their trajectory toward the executive level.



Once an organization has visible trans and nonbinary leaders, they can serve as among the most effective mentors for the next generation of C-Suite executives.

*“Those individuals I have coached and mentored into really phenomenal out nonbinary individuals are becoming the voice to others that I was to them. It's like ‘reach one, teach one’.”*

To effectively engage trans and nonbinary executive talent, companies would benefit by taking a dual approach that recognizes the current cohorts of our trans and nonbinary leaders will be most likely served by allied sponsors, while those trans and nonbinary aspiring leaders in the pipeline can be served by both allied sponsors and out executives who share some of their core identities. These efforts will enable businesses and other organizations to benefit from trans and nonbinary leadership magic.

## We're not just transgender or nonbinary executives. We are experts in our fields.

Expecting trans and nonbinary executives to speak for the entire LGBTQ+ community is ineffective. Instead, organizations would do well to partner with inclusion experts to create initiatives that effect workplace change. TNBLEC members agreed that they do not like to lead with their identities at work, but prefer to lead with their expertise and professional credibility.

*"I like to be known as a technologist who happens to be trans. At least at work, most people know me as a very strong technologist, a deep thinker, somebody that they can come to bounce things off of and get advice. As far as being trans, honestly, it only kind of comes up when we have certain events where they invite me to talk about that portion of my life."*

At the same time, all of these leaders report having to serve as identity educators to bring people along in their journeys to respecting and valuing trans and nonbinary trailblazers. While trans and nonbinary people are the experts of their own experiences, the onus of foundational LGBTQ+ education belongs to other leaders and employers.

Well-meaning businesses and leaders seeking to highlight and support out trans and nonbinary executives should take care to avoid identity-based reductionism (this goes for all marginalized identities). Reductionism happens when a thoroughly qualified executive is referred to mainly by one or two aspects of their identities—"the trans, SVP of Marketing"—as opposed to the fullness of their expertise and experience.

Companies can take proactive steps to alleviate the pressures on transgender and nonbinary individuals by acknowledging that they are not representatives or experts that speak for their entire community. To cultivate a truly inclusive workplace, companies can develop tailored resources and training materials that do not solely rely on the insights of a few. All materials should address common misconceptions head-on to help dispel myths and foster empathy and understanding, ensuring that the responsibility for creating a supportive environment is a collective effort and not a burden to transgender and nonbinary employees. By institutionalizing these new practices, companies can shift the onus of effecting positive change from the individual to the organization itself, demonstrating a true commitment to inclusion.

## Bias threatens businesses. Smart businesses invest in anti-bias education because they understand the fiscal benefits of inclusion.

Nearly every trans and nonbinary executive shared a story of being passed over for promotion or having a realignment of their portfolio of business in the name of “not making people uncomfortable.”

*“All of a sudden, I did not get any more assignments. My director said, ‘Well, there are people who are here that are uncomfortable with you, and they don't want to work with you. And because of that, I can't give you any more assignments because I can't make them work for you.’ So, I had to find work elsewhere within the company.”*

Not only are such experiences clear forms of discrimination, but they also cost businesses resources, money, and time. When employees are held back from their full potential, companies lose. Employers may end up spending more in training, realigning books of business, and more when reshuffling work from a transgender or nonbinary employee than they would in durable anti-bias education and belonging initiatives. Smart businesses don't waste money on exclusion—they invest in inclusion.

In addition, transgender and nonbinary individuals bring unique and valuable skill sets to the business world, honed through their experiences in the workplace and community. Their journey often requires the development of resilience, strategic problem-solving, and the ability to navigate complex social dynamics—traits that are highly beneficial in any corporate setting. Like entrepreneurs, they must leverage a diverse array of talents to achieve acceptance and success, demonstrating a level of adaptability and resourcefulness from which companies can greatly benefit. They can be the perfect hire for many roles.



## Untangling the complexity of one identity can mean pulling on the threads of others.

While it's challenging for trans and nonbinary employees to navigate the business world when striving for workplace inclusion, it's imperative to take self-identifiers such as race and gender into account. Identity-based initiatives such as the TNBLEC are necessary to address disparities in representation and to equip employers with techniques and tools that clear the path for talented leaders to contribute at the highest levels of their organizations. Understanding trans and nonbinary experiences of executive leadership necessitates a multidimensional understanding of intersectional identities. There is no one trans or nonbinary leadership profile or monolithic set of experiences. Race, gender, and other identities are omnipresent along with gender identity.

*"I have many marginalized intersectional identities. The one that I can't not lead with is me being a Black person. I lead with that everywhere I go. When I walk into a room, it's right there. So, I have to own it. When I came out as nonbinary, it felt like an added obstacle."*

In these small group samples, White trans and nonbinary executives report having a privilege that allows them to prioritize how and when they are open about their gender identity when their race is not a source of bias. Trans and nonbinary people of color, who are frequently identified first by their race, are often navigating ways to protect themselves from the compounding effects of bias.

One executive described a very promising dynamic in which she, a White transgender woman, had partnered with two other female executives, both cisgender, one Black and one Indian. She described the unifying effect of being women in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), and how they each brought their intersectional identities together to enhance their influence and impact.

*"For us...our section is the only one that's completely women-run. My boss is an African American woman, and my co-partner is an Indian woman. [Recently], we actually had an executive women's cocktail hour with about maybe 50-60 people. And so, that's actually more of the identity that I think is more prevalent to me at work than me being part of the LGBTQ+ community."*

It's important for organizations to learn the value of intersectionality and understand that it means something different for everyone. When organizations take intersectionality into account, they consider the various ways that privilege and bias can impact leaders and that these dynamics are very much context-driven. For example, grappling with racial bias may be the most urgent need for a Black trans woman executive in a majority White boardroom, whereas her gender identity feels more salient in a group dominated by cisgender women of diverse racial backgrounds. Bias and privilege are not fixed states, and as the workforce and leadership pipelines continue to diversify, inclusion and belonging initiatives need to be more dynamic to be durable.



## We need to cultivate influence, practice authenticity, and learn effective communication.

Executives that have mastered situational awareness, authentic leadership, and effective communication techniques are better equipped to advocate for inclusion policies and practices. Authentic leadership, a concept that has gotten more traction recently, has been studied by scholars and practitioners for years, with the core idea that leaders who are honest, transparent, and open are more effective.<sup>8</sup> By bringing their full selves to work—even with the headwinds of bias in front of them—trans and nonbinary executives are profiles in authentic leadership. They bring to bear both individual and organizational rewards of confident, honest, and bold leadership.

*“I think the main ingredient, once you come out and you are your best self because you're free, is positive confidence, because it leads to all the things that you need to become a good leader.”*

Business leaders, including researcher and noted author Brené Brown, have confirmed that psychological safety and vulnerability strengthen leaders and team cohesion.<sup>9</sup> Amidst the swirl of headlines, heated political rhetoric, and anti-trans legislation, trans and nonbinary executives are often called upon to exhibit superlative emotion management, education, and ally engagement, above and beyond their day jobs as companies grapple with responsiveness.

*“[Even] among some of our fiercest allies, the misinformation touches a place in the lizard brain. We haven't, as a movement, quite nailed the countering messages to ensure that our allies are fully aligned. And so, one of the powers of a voice like mine in a space that I have is to say whatever's going on for you. Let's get it out on the table. You know, this tension around women's rights or [gender-affirming] interventions with children and misinformation about all that. We have to cut through some of that, and it takes time to debunk the misinformation.”*

TNBLEC leaders emphasize that mastering communication—being clear, purposeful, and resonant—empowers transgender and nonbinary leaders to articulate their vision and advocate for inclusive changes. In addition, confidence rooted in a positive acknowledgment of one's journey and capabilities inspires trust and respect. Similarly, leveraging vulnerability can transform perceived weaknesses into strengths, foster a culture of transparency and connectedness, and lay a groundwork for empowerment within the corporate setting. These executives note that authenticity without situational awareness can render people ineffective.

*“[There is] a little bit of disconnection between what it means to be authentic and what it means to be able to do things correctly, while also maintaining authenticity....I don't feel at any time I'm inauthentic but I do, at times, really monitor my responses.”*

Cultivating influence within executive circles hinges on developing a nuanced blend of situational awareness, effective communication, and confident yet authentic presence. Recognizing the dynamics of each business setting allows leaders to navigate complex environments with agility.



## Conclusion

When transgender and nonbinary leaders are genuinely supported and encouraged to bring the fullness of their expertise, identities, and life experiences to their executive roles, it unlocks a wealth of opportunities and advantages for their organizations. This growing body of leadership insights points to the vitalness of:

- Harnessing individual triumph over adversity for broader institutional change;
- Centering authenticity, communication, and emotional intelligence across the C-Suite/executive tier to meet these unprecedented times; and
- Not resting on the laurels of “firsts” but building the necessary inclusion and belonging infrastructure and culture to support seconds, thirds, and executive circles that truly reflect today’s diverse workforces and marketplaces.

Creating an inclusive company is not just about allowing individuals to claim space; it is about intentionally and proactively building spaces that fully value and leverage trans and nonbinary leaders today and in the future. With more visibility at the top, Out & Equal will continue curating leadership insights from across the LGBTQ+ community.

**All quotes in this document are attributed to members of Out & Equal’s Transgender and Nonbinary Executive Leadership Circle, a collective of transgender and nonbinary professionals holding public- or private-sector C-suite or senior executive roles.**

## Sources

<sup>1</sup> McGlauffin, P. (2023, June 6). ["4 Fortune 500 companies are led by openly LGBTQ CEOs. Here’s what they’ve said about their experience in corporate America."](#) *Fortune*.

<sup>2</sup> Telford, T. (2023, June 29). ["How queer went corporate: The 50-year evolution of LGBTQ+ marketing."](#) *Washington Post*.

<sup>3</sup> ["Corporate Equality Index 2020"](#). (n.d.). HRC Digital Reports.

<sup>4</sup> Ramirez, Marc. (2024, Feb 6). ["As anti-trans legislation proliferates in 2024, community fears erasure from public view."](#) *USA Today*.

<sup>5</sup> Today, U. (2023, June 5). ["The corner closet: Why there are so few gay and transgender executives in corporate America."](#) *USA Today*.

<sup>6</sup> ["Experiences of the Lavender Ceiling: Progress and Continued Challenges Facing Out LGBTQ+ Leaders at Work"](#) | Out & Equal. (n.d.). Out & Equal.

<sup>7</sup> Perrou, M. (2023, January 12). ["Coaching, Mentoring, and Sponsorship Month: Creating Cultures of Belonging Through Mentorship"](#) | Out & Equal. Out & Equal.

<sup>8</sup> Duchene, K. (2023, September 29). ["Creating a Cohesive Team for Corporate Transformation Projects."](#) *Harvard Business Review*.

<sup>9</sup> Brown, Brené. ["Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts."](#) Random house, 2018.

**A special thanks to our Partner, JPMorgan Chase, for their support of our transgender and nonbinary research, initiatives, and programs.**