

Gender in the Water Industry: One Man of Transgender Experience's Story

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ABSTRACT

Gender is a complex topic. Most people often confuse gender and sex; Most folks don't realize that there are at least 57 genders and gender is a spectrum. Some people within our workplace and the water industry don't identify as a man or a woman, and/or their gender is more fluid (gender-expansive). In our day-to-day interactions with others, we often assume someone's gender based on their appearance, mannerisms, and other social cues that vary depending on the culture. Additionally, assuming everyone fits into the gender binary (just men and women) is often-times a barrier to being inclusive and making people feel safe and valued.

People who don't fit into the gender binary are often referred to as transgender. The term "transgender" is an umbrella term that includes a lot of people who are binary but feel their gender is not in alignment with the sex they were assigned at birth; It also includes folks who do not identify as a man or woman or their gender is fluid (often called gender-expansive or gender non-binary). Some trans people do medical transition while others do not. Trans is a Latin prefix that means "across," and Cis means "same." Someone whose gender aligns with their gender and sex assigned at birth would be referred to as cisgender.

For example, I am a man of transgender experience (also a transgender man or transman). I was assigned female at birth but transitioned to male during the course of my life. I have spent a little more than half my career being perceived as male. People often assume I am a cisgender man, go by male pronouns, and am straight because of my appearance, I have a long beard and stocky build – very masculine appearance. My gender identity is male; however, I have many interests and behaviors that do not align with the norm of what people assume are male. I don't enjoy sports, and I often talk with inflection in my voice (my voice goes up and down when I talk – largely because women are taught to speak in that fashion). Based on what I look like, people often assume I am straight. A lot of people often wonder why does this matter in the workplace. This article will discuss my past and current experience working in the water industry, as well as some information to help readers foster inclusive behaviors.



“For about half my career, I worked in the water industry, pretending to be someone I wasn’t, at least on the outside. For almost 30 years of my life, I lived and was perceived as a woman. I spent 9 years out of my 16 years in the water industry working as

a woman professional before I came out as a transman to everyone, including my employer in March of 2011”

1 MY EXPERIENCE

For about half my career, I worked in the water industry, pretending to be someone I wasn’t, at least on the outside. For almost 30 years of my life, I lived and was perceived as a woman. I was assigned female at birth, and confused sexual orientation and gender identity for most of my life. I went to school – including college and graduate school being perceived as female and spent 9 years out of my 16 years in the industry working as a woman professional. My experience as transgender and queer (i.e., someone who is not straight) represents just my story and not all people within the LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual/Agender plus) community. I came out as a transman to everyone, including my employer in March of 2011 (two years after I started medically transitioning), my friends, family, and all aspects of my life.



My first professional headshot working at an engineering firm.

Coming out as a trans person at work is very hard. For the majority of the people, they often do not have the support of their family or their employer. Most cultures and societies, due primarily to colonization, stigmatize transgender people as “not normal,” “wrong,” or something to be ashamed of. The LGBTQ+ community generally has many universal fears related to coming out: Loss of family, friends, and employment. Many people in the community fear harassment, both verbal and physical.

Before letting people to get to know me as Ari, I covered and hid a lot to prevent co-workers and people I volunteered with AWWA from knowing I was a trans, queer person. I largely feared losing their friendship, my ability to work in the water and wastewater industry as well as my own personal safety. I lived with that fear for almost a decade and spent a lot of emotional energy from being found out. Unfortunately, all that energy spent to cover took away from my job performance and my ability to make genuine connections with others – I was always guarded and, to some extent, fake to other people.

Regardless of who is reading this, many people have covered (downplayed or kept information about you a secret some aspect of your life to prevent either people from treating you differently or fear that it would prevent a job promotion or some negative impact to your career. For example, researchers at Columbia determined LGBTQIA+ people in non-accepting or non-welcoming communities live 12 years less than their non-LGBTQIA+ counterparts – due to the stress and fear they feel on a day to day basis (<https://www.advocate.com/health/2014/02/16/study-antigay-communities-lead-early-lgb-death>). Other research indicates that LGBT+ folks in STEM feel less safe, less valued, and less sense of belonging in STEM careers as compared to their non-LGBTQIA+ co-workers (Cech and Waidzunus, 2021). I have experienced some of this during my career seeing LGBTQIA+ people leave the water industry largely due to fear or a bad experience with their employer connected to their sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression.

I was almost one of them due to fear. I was lucky – it worked out for me. I tell people in the water industry all the time, the day I chose me and chose to live my truth I turned my life around in the best way possible. Transitioning also really confirmed to me that people truly treat you how they perceive you. I found that people’s assumptions about me changed in terms of what I knew, what I was able to do, and how they talked to me based on if they assumed, and I was a woman or a man. For example, when I was perceived as male (especially young like early 20’s, people treated me better and more capable to find solutions to problems as well as be able to manually fix things. A lot of people assumed I knew how to do various tasks because I was male. I found people would make assumptions about my sexual orientation because a lot of my interests were not “male” enough. Co-workers and clients would often talk about sports events to me assuming I must watch football (where I actually am not a sports fan at all). These types of conversations or assumptions weren’t really present when I was perceived as a woman. Because of that experience, I was able to really use my influence as a male-perceived person to elevate the voices of women and other underrepresented folks in our industry. It’s a gift and a competitive advantage.



My journey in the workplace via my work badge from 2007 to present day.

The great news is, by working on your bias, we can help make more people in the LGBTQIA+ community and really all communities feel welcome in the workforce and in their day to day lives. The best part is – it starts with you. You plan a huge role in helping make sure people feel safe to be who they are at work and in their lives. Here are some suggestions to get started.

2 INCLUSION TIPS

The reality is, LGBTQIA+ people, including transgender people, work in the water industry and other various environmental careers. You probably have met a trans person.

Transgender co-workers can struggle with access to basic things such as getting their name changed on all work related documents, being able to access the bathroom that aligns with their gender, misgendered (wrong pronoun usage, deadnamed (use of birthname, experience micro-aggressions¹, and harassment and in some cases physical violence. Trans people often don't have access to medical coverage they need. Often times it results in a person of trans experience to not feel safe at work and/or often hide or not tell coworkers basic things about their lives, like their kids, or partners, or other things due to fear and judgement. This situation is very common in the LGBTQIA+ community overall. For me, it was working through some of the awkward conversations (since I worked awhile in the industry before transitioning about who I am, how I wanted to be addressed, and navigating staying employed but also dealing with well-meaning people who still hurt me or put barriers in front of me or flat out didn't respect my gender identity or thought they knew it my industry better than I did. Most trans people in the work force, deal with these situations and often leave industries for more welcoming ones or completely did not share any of their past experience (i.e. are stealth. Some trans people prefer not to be open about their trans status and to just live life if possible.

For women in the water industry – many of the same problems exist that range from not being taken as seriously as their man counterparts, asked to plan events at work (often viewed as a woman's role/ aren't activities that generally are rewarded, experience microaggressions, lack of promotion/sponsorship, stigmas around family choices (-

such as having kids), being offered less opportunities, and harassment. At least in USA, having access to paid parental (which effects all genders) is a barrier and sometimes women have to choose if they can come back to work due to lack of childcare options (especially during the pandemic). Women often don't get the career feedback that's needed for their advancement because some men generally are nervous about having those conversations. Women often will not apply for jobs unless they feel they have 100% of all the qualifications versus men will apply if they feel they have about 60% of the overall qualifications for the position. If we add race, caste, ethnic background, etc. to any of these identities, additional barriers for that individual or group of people are present at work.

All of these are systematic barriers that women and transgender people experience are present in society and the workplace.



Logo of the Wandering Water Bear – an effort by Ari to assist the water industry regarding hard conversations around equity, inclusion and diversity.

Focusing on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) behaviors, starting with you, helps break down some of these barriers and helps build a safe work environment where every person can make an impact while being their most authentic selves. The problem is most people struggle with having difficult conversations about inclusion and equity. It evokes strong emotions, conflicting opinions, and potential conflict among coworkers. One of the hardest parts of this for most people is understanding that these issues as systematic so trans people

Part of my personal mission, is to assist the water industry with having hard conversations around equity, inclusion, and diversity. I run a small effort called The Wandering Water Bear, inspired by my love of the water industry, my own journey (I have moved around a bunch) and my two stuffed water bears, Wal and Wanda that provides training and storytelling to help professionals be more knowledgeable and respect differences (www.thewanderingwaterbear.com). I provide free content on various topics around inclusion as well as the LGBTQIA+ community. I have done speaking engagements for organizations such as The American Water Works Association, Water Environment Federation, Veritas, Beiersdorf, and various other organizations. I also use my LinkedIn page to post articles and share resources such as this article: "Inclusion can start with you." (<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/inclusion-can-start-you-ari-c-copeland>)

¹ Microaggression is a term used for commonplace daily verbal, behavioral or environmental slights, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative attitudes toward stigmatized or culturally marginalized groups.

To assist with your journey, here are some simple tips on how to be more inclusive at work:

- 1. Use gender-neutral language:** examples are “labor, staff, professionals, folks, everyone, people, and my personal favorite “you all.” Instead of using “manhours, craftsman, etc..” use “labor hours, FTE, Craft-professionals, etc.”. Also, using words like significant other, spouse, or partner for personal relationships helps people feel included and safe. Introducing yourself using your pronouns is also a great way to help normalize and help people feel safe to share their pronouns.
- 2. Make and commit to making fewer sexist statements:** Not using statements like “if it was easy, we would have the girl scouts do it” or “that’s men’s work” or any kind of statements that makes assumptions of what people can and cannot do based on gender –will make everyone on your team feel safe and valued. When it happens, just correct it, and commit to doing better.
- 3. Reduce assumptions and work on your personal bias** (yes, we all have them, including me!) – try to not assume everyone has the same interests (like sports for men, etc.) as well as straight, cisgender or has the same background as you. Also, using words like significant other, spouse, or partner for personal relationships helps reduce the assumptions about sexual orientation and relationship status.
- 4. Use your place of influence to elevate voices, express gratitude, and share experiences without fear or judgement to others.** Be a role model and keep others in your team accountable for being inclusive. Share times when you made a mistake or made an assumption about someone, show you corrected it, and committed to doing better. Give your team access to tools to be more inclusive.
- 5. Listen:** If someone tells you what you did or said or what someone on your team did or said, made them uncomfortable, or upset them – believe them and take action to make that person feel safe. These moments can also be learning moments. Getting defensive about it makes the situation worse and does the opposite. Taking ownership of what we do and say, educating ourselves about others, and committing to doing better creates a safe and collaborative work environment for everyone. Being inclusive is a growth mindset and a personal investment for YOU!

When we look at people as individuals and what they have to contribute or going to them for their different perspectives – we, as a project team and as the industry, benefit from that collaborative group intelligence. In order to get the diversity of thought – we have to work towards reducing barriers that people who don’t often get at the table have. When we reduce or remove those barriers (even if they exist outside our work walls), we have the best chance to create a safe place for all.

3 DEI RESOURCES

Cech E.A, Waidzunas T.J, 2021, Systemic inequalities for LGBTQ professionals in STEM, Science Advances Vol7; 3, <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.abe0933>

<https://www.catalyst.org/research/lgbtq-terms-to-know/>

<https://ideas.ted.com/how-to-make-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-a-reality-at-work-not-just-a-mission-statement/amp/>

<https://www.catalyst.org/research/lesbian-gay-bisexual-and-transgender-workplace-issues/>

<https://www.catalyst.org/research/infographic-i-am-an-ally/>

<https://www.thehrcfoundation.org/professional-resources/restroom-access-for-transgender-employees>

<https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.abe0933>

<https://www.advocate.com/health/2014/02/16/study-antigay-communities-lead-early-lgb-death>

<https://hbr.org/2014/08/why-women-dont-apply-for-jobs-unless-theyre-100-qualified>

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Ari is a Director at Large and an Incoming Vice President of the American Water Works Association. Ari also owns and operates a small venture called The Wandering Water Bear that assists companies and water industry professionals to be inclusive of LGBTQIA+ professionals and assist with helping others build behaviors that supports inclusion. Ari is open to speaking engagements for companies and groups. He can be reached at thewanderingwaterbear@gmail.com as well as through his website www.thewanderingwaterbear.com.