

PUBLICATION

Respecting Our Transgender and Allied Clients and Colleagues

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As transgender awareness and acceptance grow, many of us are becoming aware of an increasing number of transgender people in our personal and professional communities. And as decent people, we want to be respectful, but might be confused or unsure how to do so in the "right" way. As chair of BakerPride, Baker Donelson's LGBT affinity group, I would like to share some suggestions and additional resources.

What does transgender mean? [GLAAD](#) always provides helpful guidance. They say:

Transgender is a term used to describe people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. Gender identity is a person's internal, personal sense of being a man or a woman (or boy or girl.) For some people, their gender identity does not fit neatly into those two choices. For transgender people, the sex they were assigned at birth and their own internal gender identity do not match.

Because of this, an important way to demonstrate respect for transgender people is honoring how they like to refer to themselves, both in name and pronoun. Some transgender people make the decision to change their birth name or the pronouns they use to describe themselves because, although everyone's journey is different, some transgender people feel pain or anxiety about their birth name or assigned sex. Respect the name a transgender person uses, and if they offer their pronouns, use them. If you happen to know the name of the person before they changed it, do not use it without their permission. If you make a mistake and accidentally use the wrong name or pronoun, sincerely and promptly apologize.

Increasingly, you may see a person's preferred pronouns in their LinkedIn profile or email signature (such as "he/him/his," "she/her/hers," "they/them/theirs" or something else entirely). Many supporters and allies of the transgender community have started to identify their preferred pronouns to reduce the stigma or isolation transgender people might feel in having to identify their own pronouns.

Another way to respect the transgender community and their allies is to consider unwitting assumptions you might be making about gender identity, including casual and unnecessary uses. For example, letters may not need to be addressed to "Ms. Smith," and new hire paperwork could be expanded to include the opportunity to share preferred names and pronouns. This could correct awkward database errors too: I am married to a "Blair," who regularly gets letters incorrectly addressed.

You may unknowingly have colleagues and clients who are transgender. Some may have transitioned before you came to know them or may not be comfortable being honest at work about their gender identity. Providing an environment where employees can be their whole selves at work is proven to increase productivity and retention. The best way to be an ally is to listen with an open mind and to educate yourself.

Many people have questions about "transitioning," which occurs over time and can include (from GLAAD) telling one's family, friends and co-workers; using a different name and new pronouns; dressing differently; changing one's name and/or sex on legal documents; hormone therapy; and possibly (though not always) one or more types of surgery. The exact steps involved in transitioning vary from person to person, and there is no

right or wrong way for a transgender person to do so. Each person, whether transgender or not, is entitled to their personal privacy, so avoid questioning a transgender person about their transition unless invited to do so.

Many organizations like ours have been reflecting on these issues recently. Diversity and inclusion are core values at Baker Donelson. We believe it is a matter of respect for our clients and colleagues, their families, and the communities we serve to ensure we are addressing the needs of our transgender and gender non-conforming employees. Because of that, we've organized a working group of attorneys and staff across our footprint to develop recommendations to ensure that we are holding ourselves to the highest standards. I look forward to sharing some of these recommendations in future articles.