

# Performance anxiety

*Lies, pretense and mimicking heterosexual behaviors all play a part in staying locked inside the corporate closet*

by Grant Michael Menzies

It is a familiar scenario for all too many of us. You've been through that first interview, and the recommendations from the personnel director carry you on to the second. You're one of the chosen few. You sit before your future superior—you hope, or do you?—and another witness who asks the questions the department head can't think of. Your résumé and your letters of recommendation lie on the table between you. You are grilled about all aspects of work: You sail through. You are posed hypothetical human relations problems: You confidently solve them. Everything's going your way. At the end, there is nothing more to say, just smiles all around.

## BOOKS

It is then they ask, after a pregnant pause, "Are you sure there isn't something else you should tell us?" The pregnant pause lasts a moment, then breaks water and gives birth to smiles no longer welcoming. You're in your 30s after all. They noted you wear no wedding ring. You're a tad too nattily dressed. Know what? You'd better forget about this place. As much as you wanted and needed the job, as much as the job needs your talents, you've been had. "They think I'm gay." And they're right. Even if this doesn't sound familiar, *The Corporate Closet* is for you. Especially if it doesn't sound familiar.

Beginning in 1990, author James D. Woods, now professor of communications at City University of New York/Staten Island, with the help of Jay Lucas, interviewed a core group of 70 gay men regarding their lives and careers as professionals in a heterosexist work world.

Somewhat surprisingly, many of those interviewed expressed a stronger interest in keeping the peace in their work environments than confronting homophobic bosses and co-workers whose hobnail boots leave daily marks on their closeted sensitivities. Says gay employee Eric, whose name, as all the others used in the book, is changed for protection, "There's an attorney that works for us and they say he's a little bit strange or gay. One time my boss said, 'Watch out. He's a great attorney, but watch out for him because he's gay.'" alluding no doubt to the well-known gay propensity for attacking anything in a three-piece suit. Eric, unwilling to confront his boss, accommodated him by nodding and saying, "Okay, I'll be sure I watch out for him."

Stuart, after making the grade with a senior associate of a law firm he hoped to join, thought it right during the interview that he tell her the truth not just about his background but also about his being gay. He approached it subtly. "I wanted to hear more about the social atmosphere of the firm," he related to Woods later. He asked the senior associate if the firm "was also a tolerant place for a gay man." The senior associate, previously poised, now seemed puzzled, until Stuart spoke the fateful "G" word. Though taken aback, the senior associate murmured something about another attorney at the firm "rumored to be gay." "He has a lot of antiques," she floundered. "We could go by his office and you'll see what I mean."

"I realized I had made a terrible mistake," Stuart says. The firm declined to make him an offer. Unfortunately, the experience was so traumatic for Stuart that he declares he will never "out" himself again. As understandable as this perspec-

ive is, it only helps hand on the key to the closet to the next gay employee. As Woods indicates, lying is often condoned when it is part of the effort to survive, to avoid harm or to avert crisis. Many gay men, he says, "are quick to argue that deception is justified by the circumstances." They make a "Faustian bargain."

*The Corporate Closet* points up the myth common in business settings: That professionals are, or ought to be, asexual at work. At the same time in most professional situations there operates a double standard, fortifying the hegemony of heterosexism to where it invades every person, every conversation, in the office, lunchroom or toilet. The mug shots of kids and wives on desktops or plastered to a computer monitor, the wedding bands prominently displayed, the "bring-a-girlfriend" company picnics—all militate against effective communication, trust and productivity where gay professionals are concerned. Gay employees can be so obsessed with "managing" their sexuality in a heterosexist work environment they can lose sight of their real professional role.

"Although many have tried," Woods says in his chapter titled Dismantling the Closet, "no one yet established the relevance of sexual orientation to the performance of most jobs (excepting, perhaps, those that require actual sexual contact). Only under exceptional circumstances would the type or intensity of a man's erotic interests interfere with his ability to, say, trade municipal bonds, teach

geometry, or design software." Objections to gay employees "are quickly exposed as the most brutal, circular form of prejudice: A gay man's sexuality is disruptive only because others despise him for it."

If gay male professionals are still out there, making up imaginary girlfriends and sexy weekend jaunts, reading up on football to hold forth in the company john, flirting with female secretaries, and showing up to work the day

after a lover's or close friend's death knowing they dare not speak of it to anyone, then there is no "gay community." If a community existed, so would the empowerment to stand up, shout your lover's name, be seen at a concert and ballet or gay bar and drag club and not care what the firm, the school board or the secretary thinks.

Woods is optimistic. "More and more gay professionals can now point to a gay peer who showed them an alternative to the closet," he writes. "Business is only now waking up to the presence of its lesbian and gay employees...[bringing] the resistance, misunderstanding, and social clumsiness we would expect to accompany so fundamental a change. By making themselves visible, lesbian and gay professionals are helping to shatter the presumption that the closet is a necessary, or even desirable, response to heterosexism."

Perhaps the best response, when the boss starts spouting Monday night football, is to leave *The Corporate Closet* firmly on his or her desk.

*The Corporate Closet*  
by James D. Woods with Jay H. Lucas  
The Free Press, 1993



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