

## Collective Communication within LGBT Leadership: Sharing the Vision

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*With no national anti-discrimination law in place to protect LGBT community members (American Civil Liberties Union, 2016), it is vital to understand how marginalized leaders motivate others to enact change. Using participatory ethnographic methods, this study followed a LGBT Community Rights Group for five months. Two leadership communication strategies enabled LGBT leaders to act as community change agents: 1) cohesive communication encouraged collective discussion and leveraged individual group members' expertise, 2) proactive communication evoked tenacious defense strategies to counter opposition and facilitate outreach with external organizations. Collective leadership modeled by this LGBT Rights Group offers communication strategies for motivating community change.*

*Keywords:* LGBT leadership, community engaged research, leading change, relational leadership

Leadership is a universal phenomenon that exists within every culture (Hackman & Johnson, 2009). As Hackman and Johnson (2009) explain, “leadership is human (symbolic) communication which modifies the attitudes and behaviors of others in order to meet shared group goals and needs” (p. 11). Interest in leadership has surged. After completing a search for the term “leadership” on Amazon.com books, over 80,000 books ranging from leader strategies to motivational styles were identified (Amazon, 2018). However, only 497 leadership titles pertained to “minority leadership” and only 115 titles specified “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender leadership” or the abbreviation “LGBT leadership” (Amazon, 2018). Further, on Google Scholar, while one may be encouraged to know there are 33,700 links to documents on “LGBT leadership,” this represents less than one percent of the 3,930,000 links to documents for the search term “leadership” (Google Scholar, 2018). These figures call attention to the need to further explore leadership in non-dominant groups.

Understanding effective leadership in the LGBT community is vital for these individuals to achieve not only political rights, but basic human rights. Though marriage equality was issued in early 2015, allowing same-sex couples to legally marry in the United States, issues surrounding the LGBT community continue to perpetuate violence and discrimination of those with differing sexual orientations and gender identities. Currently, there is no nation-wide anti-discrimination employment law/policy in place, and in 28 of the 50 states business owners can fire individuals who are suspected or confirmed to be gay or transgender (American Civil Liberties Union, 2016). Further, hate crimes against LGBT individuals are committed nationally at alarming rates (Human Rights Campaign, 2015). These ongoing concerns invite a call for leadership. Coon (2001) argues that additional scholarship surrounding the LGBT community is needed; specifically, research should consider how sexual orientation and other characteristics have allowed LGBT individuals to “successfully navigate through societal prejudices and oppression, [which] may provide the insight necessary for the [LGBT] community to further its agenda” (p. 5). Fassinger, Shullman, and Stevenson (2010) further contend that “scholarly work on leadership has yet to consider the characteristics and perspectives that LGBT individuals may bring to the process of leadership” (p. 201).

Communication is a central factor in leadership (Riggio, Riggio, Salinas, & Cole, 2003), with communication and decision-making strategies varying within diverse groups (Swann, Polzer, Seyle, & Ko, 2004). Yet, research surrounding leadership often promotes leadership as hierarchal and typically casts leaders as heterosexual males (Chin & Sanchez-Hucles, 2007). Studying marginalized leaders is important to better understand leadership from the perspective of underrepresented groups and identify successful leadership communication processes (Moon, 1996). Additionally, marginalized leaders have a unique opportunity to enact change because the oppression they face allows them to see their own position, as well as entire systems (Fassinger et al., 2010). Enacting social change is important because, according to the American Sociological Association (2018), social

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change brings about a positive shift in societal acceptance over both short and long periods of time. Therefore, this qualitative study examines how LGBT leaders use communication strategies to attain community specific goals and contributes to the scholarship of marginalized leadership by addressing the research question:

*How do LGBT leaders communicate their leadership in ways that motivate others to enact social change?*

## **Leadership**

Leadership is a universal phenomenon, occurring naturally despite differences in culture and race (Murdock, 1967). Yet, leadership is one of the most recognized and studied phenomenon in human history while simultaneously being one of the most misunderstood (Burns, 1978). Considering leadership definitions throughout scholarship, a current definition is “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2004, p. 3). However, leadership wasn’t always conceptualized as a process; in fact, leadership was originally studied as an individual phenomenon where people were born with particular characteristics or traits that destined them for leadership (Bass, 1981). Following, four common leadership themes are explained to inform the study and explore leadership behavior within an LGBT organization: 1) individualistic leadership, 2) context and situational leadership 3) relational leadership, and 4) developmental leadership.

### **Individualistic Leadership**

Individualistic leadership theories articulate that people are natural born leaders with unique characteristics, already possessing the ability to lead based on biological characteristics (Mostovicz, Kakabadse, & Kakabadse, 2009). Individualistic leadership is typically governed by two theories: 1) trait leadership theory and 2) charismatic leadership theory. Trait theory focuses on individual characteristics and personality traits which are considered to enhance leadership ability (Zaccaro, 2007). Traits rooted within the individual include extroversion, discipline, and sociability, which enhance leader effectiveness (Mumford, Campion, & Morgeson, 2007). Charismatic individuals tend to maintain influence through communicating confidence and dominance, setting clear goals, and upholding a sense of purpose (deVries, Bakker-Pieper, & Oostenveld, 2010). Charismatic leaders tend to rise in times of trouble or crisis, as people turn to individuals who possess these “mystical” qualities for guidance (Hackman & Johnson, 2009).

### **Context and Situational Leadership**

Context leadership theories consider the times, contexts, and circumstances requiring leadership (Bass, 1981). Osborn, Hunt, and Jauch (2002) explain, “change the context and the leadership changes as does what is sought and whether specific leadership patterns are considered effective” (p. 797). According to contextual leadership theories, leadership is determined by outside factors, such as the ability for a group to come together to achieve a common goal, complete a specific task or series of tasks, and identify strong members suited for leadership (Graeff, 1997). Context leadership differs from situational leadership; context leadership arises from the need for a leader at a specific time and place, whereas situational leadership occurs when an existing leader evaluates situation factors and adopts the best strategy to develop followers while maximizing outcomes (Lynch, 2015).

Situational leadership is unique because it works as an identification process where leaders may be matched to positions, trained to change the situation to better fit their leadership style, or adapt their leadership style to the situation (Fiedler, Chemers, & Mahar, 1977). Situational leaders typically develop either a directive or supportive leadership style (Randolph & Blackburn, 1989) using four strategies depending on the context and situation: telling, selling, participating, and delegating (Hackman & Johnson, 2009). *Telling* requires directive explicit communication when there is a high task focus and low relationship focus. For high focus on tasks and relationships, leaders still use directive communication but the communication is used to persuade or *sell* their followers on completing the tasks while fostering positive relationships. *Participation* occurs when leaders attend to relationships and are less focused on the task, causing less directive behavior. When leaders have established trusting relationships and followers understand the task (low focus on task), leaders *delegate* work to followers with minimal directive communication.

### **Relational Leadership**

Relational leadership theories focus on how leaders communicate emotion to connect and relate with their followers (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Relational leaders not only express emotions, but often encourage followers to share emotions (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Relationship-oriented leadership breaks away from task-oriented communication to honor connections between leaders and followers (Riforgiate & Ruder, 2017). Leaders engaging in relational styles motivate followers by relying on emotional expression, such as being in tune with their own feelings and reframing or directing follower emotional experiences (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Relational leadership is rooted in leader-follower interactions to set expectations, which highlights the importance of motivating followers while establishing and matching followers to roles (Bass, 1981). Relational leaders rely on these interactions to evaluate the best way to achieve goals and create cohesion amongst group members (Graen, 1976).

### **Developmental Leadership**

Burns (1978) developed transformational leadership as a contrast to transactional leadership theory. Transactional leadership is characterized as a purposeful exchange of power, motivated by rewards and punishment, where a leader directs followers to accomplish discrete tasks (Bass, 1990). In contrast, transformational leadership is mutually beneficial, where leaders act as change agents to develop their followers into leaders (Riforgiate, 2016). Transformational leaders encourage followers to use their unique differences and individual characteristics (paired with past experiences, knowledge, and creativity) to shape the group into something bigger while making each member stronger (Yammarino, Spangler, & Bass, 1993). These leaders look for new ways to accomplish goals, take risks, find more effective ways of completing tasks, and challenge the status quo (Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996). Leaders who employ a transformational style set high expectations for their followers and work alongside them to achieve those expectations (Riforgiate, 2016). Ultimately, transformational leaders, “elevate the follower’s level of maturity and ideals as well as concerns for achievement, self-actualization, and the well-being of others, the organization, and society” (Bass, 1993, p. 11). This style of leadership strengthens follower commitment and organizational loyalty while enhancing overall performance (Bass, 1993).

### **LGBT Leadership**

Leadership research predominantly focuses on majority group members, often the white, upper-class, heterosexual individuals (Chin & Sanchez-Hucles, 2007). Minority groups, including the LGBT community, are less frequently represented in leadership research (Coon, 2001). However, LGBT leaders engage in effective leadership utilizing characteristics based on sexual orientation alongside relational, emotional, and motivational styles to lead people to fight for individual rights (Fassinger et al., 2010).

LGBT individuals have made significant contributions benefiting society; from influential poets such as Oscar Wilde and Gertrude Stein, to political leaders like Alexander the Great and Harvey Milk, LGBT individuals have solidified their footprints in history (Polaski, 2011). Unfortunately, many of LGBT leaders’ accomplishments are not widely publicized, thus making the strides of the LGBT community under-acknowledged (Leipold, 2014). Through fear of repercussion, rejection, and criminalization, the sexual orientation and gender identity of influential LGBT leaders was often kept hidden by the individuals themselves (Coon, 2001). It wasn’t until the rise of the gay rights movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that the LGBT community received any recognition at all (Clendinen & Nagourney, 1999).

Interestingly, marginalization, despite the heterosexist effects it has on the LGBT community, can bring positive outcomes. “Learning to cope with the stresses related to marginalization actually may catalyze certain kinds of skill development that aid in LGBT individuals in leadership roles” (Fassinger et al., 2010, p. 206). LGBT individuals develop a sense of “crisis competence” through the coming out process that may allow them to accept and react better to criticism, evaluate their own stances on important issues even when opposed, develop a strong support network, advocate for inequality, and assess their own needs, goals, and psychological/mental state (Friend, 1991). LGBT leaders possess a unique ability to relate to and motivate their followers due to a shared marginalized status, frustration, and empathy towards others who experience similar inequalities (Chang & Bowring, 2015).

Further, LGBT individuals possess a sense of biculturalism, or the ability to simultaneously exist within two cultures, internalize otherness, and use creativity in decision making (Brown, 1989). Operating with a sense of

biculturalism, LGBT individuals understand the societal norms and rules yet are also able to place these norms within their own culture to assess what needs to be changed. This allows LGBT leaders to influence others to look at the dominant behavior differently while getting other sexual minorities to “see differently, hear differently, and thus potentially challenge the conventional wisdom” (Brown, 1989, p. 451). Since LGBT individuals are constantly inventing new ways to enact change, LGBT leaders can restructure society creatively, allowing others to “create boundaries that will work where none exist from tools that may only partially suited to the task” (Brown, 1989, p. 452).

Fassinger et al. (2010) argue for a model of LGBT leadership enactment and assert that sexual orientation, specifically the disclosure of a leader’s “outness” to other group members, is a key factor for LGBT leadership. LGBT leaders tend to identify as “queer” and are motivated to question systems in place and seek societal change by setting much higher goals and standards (Renn, 2007). Like transformational leaders, LGBT leaders “demand deeper change ... enacting transformational and other modern leadership approaches” (Fassinger et al., 2010, p. 207).

Many openly gay and lesbian individuals employed in leadership positions within the workforce credit their sexual orientation as having a positive impact on their career (Coon, 2001). These leaders articulate that their sexual orientation gave them unique leadership practices to successfully change the status quo, improve the work environment, motivate and empower co-workers, implement an organizational vision, inspire others to take risks, and be open towards others by using listening skills and expressing empathy (Coon, 2001). “Outness” is linked to positive job satisfaction, workplace morale, and higher levels of engagement (Snyder, 2006). According to Snyder (2006), after interviewing 150 openly gay male executives, these leaders exemplified leadership practices commonly associated with transformational leadership including adaptability, creativity, and strong communication.

LGBT leaders enact multiple facets of leadership theories in their communication. Through the review of leadership theory, how LGBT individuals have historically and professionally enacted leadership, and existing research on LGBT leadership, it is clear that the LGBT community has effective leaders. To extend this research, this study focuses on how LGBT leaders use communication to explore the question:

*How do LGBT leaders communicate their leadership in ways that motivate others to enact social change?*

### **Qualitative Methods**

Qualitative methods are recognized as an influential tool for social science research. While quantitative methodology tends to answer the *who*, *what*, *when*, and *where* questions, it is less effective at capturing the *how* or *why* a phenomenon occurs (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Therefore, qualitative methods including participatory observations and a focus group interview were used to elucidate the experiences and communication strategies of LGBT leaders.

### **Participants**

The first author approached a civil rights group in a Midwestern town (pseudonym Anytown) and they agreed to participate in this study. While mostly progressive, the state where Anytown is located does not protect LGBT individuals from discrimination in the forms of employment, housing, or service. This group, referred to as the LGBT Campaign (LGBTC), was chosen because of their community achievements and reputation. For example, in the past, LGBTC successfully took on multiple cases of harassment and misconduct against the LGBT community and actively fought against LGBT discrimination throughout the community by displaying billboards promoting LGBT acceptance, holding information sessions at community events to educate the non-LGBT community members, and providing scholarship opportunities for LGBT students attending the local college. The group still has a vocal presence in the community and is known as an activist group that takes on discriminatory cases against LGBT community members. LGBTC is also a local chapter of a national LGBT rights campaign and identifies with the larger organization’s mission statement (to achieve equality for all).

At the time of the study, LGBTC consisted of 50 members who were a mix of LGBT individuals and allies and included three levels of involvement: (1) Donor, (2) Passive, and (3) Active Membership. *Donor membership*

(29 members) was identified as non-participatory commitment, where members paid annual dues (\$10 a year) but did not engage in organization decisions. *Passive membership* (12 members) included those who paid annual dues and took on minimal responsibilities (e.g., attending social events, attending board meetings). Finally, *active members* (9 members) provided a heavy hand in the decision-making process and leadership regarding LGBTC, holding formal positions (President, Secretary, and Treasurer) and unofficial positions that were identified simply as Members-at-Large (no formal “title” but whose opinion is valued).

Active members planned and hosted social gatherings that passive members attended. Additionally, active members organized and participated in political gatherings, aiding in the enactment of community change within Anytown and were responsible for all financial decisions of LGBTC. Active members met at monthly board meetings to discuss community LGBT issues and corresponded frequently between meetings (primarily via email). This study focuses on these nine active member leaders to explore LGBT leader communication strategies.

All nine active members are white but differ in age (upper twenties to upper forties), sex, gender and sexual identity. Five of the nine individuals self-identified as male and four self-identified as female. Three males and one female are LGBT community allies (neither gay nor transgender), while the other five are LGBT (three gay/lesbian and two transgender).

### **Research Participation and Data Collection**

After contacting the president of this group, the first author was granted access to attend monthly board meetings, social gatherings, and the public City Commission meetings. University IRB approval was obtained, group members signed consent forms, and members were fully aware of the role the first author held as a research participant-observer. As a gay man, the first author brought his own ideas surrounding social justice and LGBT equality and engaged in meetings and group decision making processes. Because of the first author’s experiences of discrimination due to his sexual orientation, he was aware of his position and worked to provide an accurate account of LGBTC throughout the research process by recording interactions and interviews to review and share with the second researcher and including excerpts in the study as support for findings. Acknowledging his own biases, he worked closely with the second author (heterosexual female), who was not involved in the group and provided an outsider perspective to reduce bias throughout the research, analysis, and writing process. Further, observations were shared with two other communication experts (heterosexual females) to gain greater perspective for the analysis.

The first author attended five monthly board meetings, lasting one to two hours each. The first board meeting introduced LGBTC to the research process and was also used to answer questions, while starting the researcher’s assimilation into the group (paying dues, learning LGBTC’s mission/history, and identifying each board member’s role). Subsequent board meetings occurred in the evening at a local café or the living room of a board member’s home. During these meetings, the researcher was an active participant, engaged in group discussions, and suggested ways to address civic injustice experienced by the LGBT community in Anytown. Meetings were recorded and transcribed (64 typed, double-spaced text pages). The researcher also took hand-written field notes at each meeting (30 hand-written pages) which detailed who talked when, instructions given, how often the individuals asked for help from other group members, when emotion was salient during conversations, and how group members interacted with one another. Additionally, the researcher attended several group educational and social events, as well as a City Commission meeting which included discussion of an LGBT anti-discrimination ordinance generated by LGBTC.

After the observations, an hour-long focus group was conducted to ask questions about observations and engage in member checking to accurately represent LGBTC member experiences. Member checking allowed participants to reflect on observations, verify accuracy, and add to the researcher’s understanding (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2013). Study quality is enhanced when participants recognize accuracy and adjust interpretations (Krefting, 1991).

Of the nine board members, four attended the focus group (three LGBTC Members-at-Large and the President) that took place at a local coffee shop (20 typed, double-spaced text pages). While not all LGBTC board members attended the focus group, the four participating members were the most experienced and vocal members. Focus group LGBTC leaders discussed their roles within LGBTC, how the leadership throughout LGBTC is determined, and challenges they felt the group was facing, by answering questions such as: “How is leadership

within LBGT rotated?” “How has the variety of LGBT representation within the group added to your success?” and, “What is the overall goal you want to accomplish for LBGT?”

### Analysis

After observing the monthly board meetings, participating in social and educational events, and attending the City Commission meeting, coding occurred in two phases: (1) an initial phase, where data was coded line-by-line by the first author, identifying the concept or theme that was salient; and (2) a focused phase, where the line-by-line codes were then evaluated (Tracy, 2013) by both the first and second author. During the initial coding phase, utterances that fit the four common leadership themes noted in the literature review were identified through a close reading of the transcripts. Three steps occurred during the first stage of coding. First, transcripts were read carefully to gain a better understanding of the meetings. Second, transcripts were color-coded to connect each segment to common leadership themes based on existing research (e.g., relational leadership utterances were highlighted in yellow, developmental leadership utterances highlighted in blue, etc.). In this initial phase, coding included all leadership theories to remain open to the idea that participants might engage in any number of leader communication strategies. Third, as patterns of leadership communication were identified, memos were inserted in the transcript margins to note how each utterance reflected communication practices.

In the second focused coding phase, the richest first phase codes were used to explain, organize, and sort through the data. Transcripts were reviewed and organized by the color coordinated utterances into separate documents for closer comparison of each utterance resulting in 44 coded segments for individual leadership (leadership influenced by specific traits or individual characteristics), 34 coded segments for contextual leadership (leadership based on a situation or context factor), 175 coded segments for relational leadership (leadership relying on emotion or interaction), and 38 coded segments for developmental leadership (leadership to develop followers into potential leaders).

Upon review of the codes for each type of leadership communication, commonalities were identified by the first author while consulting with the second author extensively. Using the memos from the first coding phase, five common themes of leadership communication specific to LBGT were identified (organizational communication, discussion-based communication, emotional communication, tenacious communication, and communicative outreach). These five themes were then collapsed into two primary themes, where organizational and discussion-based communication were used by leaders to establish *cohesive communication* and emotional communication, tenacious communication, and communicative outreach were leveraged by leaders to create *proactive communication*.

Considering the initial and focused coding and the resulting themes, focus group questions were created in conversation between the first and second author for LBGT board members. During the focus group conversation, LBGT leaders confirmed and enriched the data by articulating uncertainties and expanding on patterns they agreed or disagreed with. Finally, meeting and focus group transcriptions were revisited based in the focus group and re-interpreted based on board members' feedback by the first author. The first and second author worked together on the final analysis which confirmed the two primary themes and refined sub-themes presented below.

### Findings

This study addressed the research question: *How do LGBT leaders communicate their leadership in ways that motivate others to enact social change?* Analysis indicated that LBGT leaders enacted a form of collective leadership to coordinate communication and activity as a cohesive unit. Specifically, LBGT leaders motivated others to enact change through two strategies: (1) cohesive communication and (2) proactive communication. As will be further articulated, these leadership strategies became particularly important for LBGT leaders to create social change because as minority group members, they had to address dominant group community elected leaders who held positions of legitimate power to enact community change.

### Cohesive Communication

The first major strategy, cohesive communication, occurred when LGBTBC leaders communicated and acted as a unified group to enhance the LGBTBC's ability to enact change. LGBTBC engaged in cohesive communication through three distinct methods: (1) identification and assimilation, (2) group discussion, and (3) individual expertise.

First, through *identification and assimilation*, LGBTBC leaders identified members with leadership potential, encouraged them to take on more responsibility, and trained them for additional leadership. While this is a strategy leaders may rely on generally, it became a particularly important strategy for LGBTBC and was different from mainstream leadership theories because of the unique challenges in representing minority members and moving minority members into leadership. The number of potential LGBT minority leaders was greatly limited based on the small number of LGBT individuals in the community and the reluctance of minority members to become actively involved. Therefore, identifying and assimilating potential leaders became an explicit goal of high importance.

LGBTBC has played an integral part in enhancing the lives of the LGBT citizens in Anytown for many years. However, the previous leadership of LGBTBC had self-identified as mostly heterosexual and recognized that to better understand and represent the needs of LGBT individuals to create social change, more diversity was needed on the board. Through recruiting efforts to be more inclusive, at the time of the study, 80% of the group's board members were new to the board and serving in their first term, including the President.

During the focus group interview, Casey, an official board member, explained that for the group to be taken more seriously, they needed more representation of lesbian, gay, and bisexual members. Casey shared, "Most of the previous board members were straight. They wanted fresh faces that actually represented our group because they thought that we would help engage the community more than they could." Jamie, an LGBTBC Member-at-Large explained that the previous board members "identified people who had specific areas of knowledge or very closely held interests and could bring that specialty to the group." Prospective (and now current) board members were intentionally and specifically approached to take on these responsibilities.

Identifying LGBT individuals as potential leaders was an important aspect of the identification process and took greater effort than recruiting dominant group leaders. Past LGBTBC leaders had more power in the community to be heard and accepted based on their majority status (heterosexual) but recognized their ability to understand and represent LGBTBC member's experiences was simultaneously limited *because* of their majority status. However, LGBT individuals as minority group members faced different challenges in leading because their concerns were not viewed as widespread or substantive enough by the general community. These challenges for both dominant and non-dominant leaders made identifying potential leaders in LGBTBC different from the way leadership succession is studied in organizations where there is a hierarchical structure for leadership. An emphasis on building relationships through open communication at social events and disclosing reasons for LGBT individuals to move in to leadership were used to actively recruit for greater diversity on the leadership board.

Once identified, new board members had to assimilate into the group's culture. Two of the previous board members moved from "official" leadership roles to Member-at-Large positions to transition and help the new board. Casey explained, "That's why [the two previous board members] stayed on, so that somebody would be there to steer the ship." These previous board members helped the new members learn the processes of active membership and gave the new LGBTBC leaders the tools they needed to essentially "run" the organization. Besides continuity, having officers who were part of the LGBT minority group work in tangent with heterosexual dominant group members (allies) allowed for both groups to offer different affordances to the group; this will be further discussed below as individual expertise.

The second way LGBTBC leaders engaged in cohesive communication was through *group discussion* and decision making. Again, most groups engage in discussion, but what made this communication exchange interesting was the way the leaders collectively and explicitly focus on forming tangible goals and the way the group would deliberate extensively until decisions were unanimous. Based on the literature review provided at the beginning of this study, LGBTBC's leadership differs from the dominant theories that cast the leader as an individual influencing followers; instead LGBTBC shared leadership across many individuals and did not weigh one leader's opinion any more than the others.

In any given context, each member of the board could speak for the organization with the authority and backing of the board; this allowed for LGBTBC leadership to be in multiple locations at once and to speak in a unified

voice. The president of LGBTTC did not have more power or say than any of the other board members (including members-at-large), indicating how important communication and unanimous support for decisions were across the leaders. Group discussion was used to ensure that every tactic implemented was agreed upon by the entire board, unifying their decisions and enhancing cohesion amongst the nine leaders. Group discussion that created cohesive decision making occurred on two levels: (1) educating the community and (2) addressing legislative concerns.

First, when educating the Anytown community on LGBT issues, LGBTTC leaders felt it was important for citizens to understand LGBT discrimination occurring daily. Pat articulated the importance of consistent community education by *all* group members because it dispelled common misconceptions about LGBT individuals. Pat explained, "There are so many people who just have such a knee jerk reaction to things, especially [in this state]. I think we fix that when we have booths at places and they see normal people sitting at them." Jamie agreed, "Yea, they see these LGBT people who don't run right up to them and they see us differently." Pat and Jamie proceeded to talk about how, by just attending certain events where they could set up a table and pass out pamphlets, LGBT individuals who may have been unaware of the group's existence became aware, sought membership, or simply thanked them for their work. Increasing community awareness became an agreed upon crucial tactic for the LGBTTC leaders.

As the year progressed, later meetings focused on political responsibilities and legislative decisions. A major goal of LGBTTC was getting sexual orientation and gender identity on the list of protected classes in the Anytown. LGBT individuals can still be fired from their jobs, evicted from their homes, and denied service nationally, and Anytown was no exception. LGBTTC prioritized addressing these concerns, creating a focused goal.

The LGBTTC President attended the City Commission meetings to speak on behalf of LGBTTC addressing the need for social change in Anytown, but it became clear in three months of City Commission meetings that one voice speaking for a group was not enough. Casey emphasized this after the November City Commission meeting saying:

We need more voices than just mine and Jamie's every month. The Commission won't fix the problem because they don't feel like there is a problem. We need to prove that this issue is affecting more than just two people.

At this November board meeting the legislative discussion was most salient.

Alex asserted they needed to develop a "political campaign" to get the City Commission members to take them seriously. The group agreed, but Jordan, a Member-at-Large, argued that this wouldn't be possible unless they could prove they had "political clout." Alex agreed, "We have a long history about speaking up for injustice, but when it comes to being politically savvy, [LGBTTC] tends to fall flat." To enact actual change, Jordan noted that as a group they needed to start fighting the City Commission more politically, implementing change with "brute force and hardball politics." Jordan argued, "We need to draft an anti-discrimination ordinance. We need to identify voters that would support the ordinance. We need to control the news in our favor."

During this meeting, LGBTTC leadership shifted from sometimes individualistic approaches to collective agreed upon tactics. The use of the word "we" became more prevalent and demonstrated they worked as a group force. LGBTTC leaders knew they had a tough road ahead and they needed to band together. Jesse confirmed the additional focus and collective commitment that passing the ordinance would require, stating:

This is going to take us away from responsibilities that we would rather be doing, life responsibilities. We are all gonna' have to decide if we are willing to give that up to focus on this, so that we can all speak for each other. Because, in order for this to work, we all will have to know what's going on and the only way for that to happen is if everyone in the group is just as involved, responsive, and committed.

The leaders of LGBTTC deliberated this decision for approximately two hours, engaged in back and forth discussion, and amended ideas they thought were good, but not strong enough. For example, Alex proposed potential allies, Jordan shared concerns and proposed alternative solutions, then Alex affirmed the suggestion noting "That's a group of young people with energy and a thirst for change." LGBTTC also sought to include all members with Alex suggesting, "Lets draft an email identifying what we want to do and what we need help with, and then



maybe use our annual party as a way to confirm this with all our members.” At the end of the meeting, the leaders agreed on the steps they would collectively take to build their political clout to be taken seriously by the City Commission.

The group also agreed they needed to research the process neighboring communities used to get anti-discrimination ordinances passed and how other communities enforced discrimination violations. Conversations were lively, with notable ideas and information sharing between all board members. For example, when Jessie shared how difficult discrimination was to prove, Alex explained that was why they needed to see what other communities were doing, and Casey provided additional information she had from her contacts in the City Commission that would make the proposal more likely to be adopted. This discussion-based process allowed LGBTBC leaders to identify every angle of the argument, dissect it as a group, share additional information, and address potential drawbacks to make their strategy as strong as possible.

After becoming more diverse and incorporating different gender identifications and sexual orientations into the group, LGBTBC needed to make sure that all the diverse experiences and ways of thinking were heard. This is important because, as Clark (2015) points out, for organizations comprised of diverse individuals to function appropriately, the marginalized individuals need to feel comfortable speaking up and speaking out about issues that are important to them. Using a unanimous decision-making process through group discussion, LGBTBC leaders accomplished more together than any one of them could have individually. Truly sharing leadership (a departure from the way leadership is studied as held by an individual) allowed each board member to represent the group at any venue; highlighting how the group was larger and more encompassing than one or two people attending City Commission meetings.

The third way LGBTBC leadership practiced cohesive communication was by leveraging *individual expertise* to work toward the common group goal. The board trusted each other and turned to specific members for help because those individuals were better equipped to resolve the issue due to their background, interests, and expertise. While LGBTBC relied on knowledge bases of members, they were unique compared to other leaders in the ways they drew on the embodied marginalized experiences of members across different sexual orientations to provide lived expertise and perspective. By alternating responsibilities based on expertise, there was an ever-changing shift in leadership of the group, which tended to be shared. This reliance on everyone’s expertise was confirmed in the focus group when Pat, Casey, and Jamie spoke up about the experiences everyone brought to the group.

Examples of expertise included Pat’s research skills when she shared, “I’m really good at finding articles about all different kinds of things, so I identified all the laws and I contacted city attorneys.” Pat recognized Jordan and Casey’s contributions, sharing that they “have taken on the majority of leadership when it comes to politics and talking to the Commissioners.” Jamie self-identified as a “Trans Activist” and explained, “No one else on the board can address Trans issues like I can, ‘cause I’m so involved in it and I’m the only Trans person on the board who is entirely out about it.” Jamie instructed LGBTBC regarding Transgender rights and injustices and spoke during the public comment portions of the City Commission meetings when Trans issues went unaddressed. Alex and Jordan provided “historical knowledge of what they’ve gone through in the past with the challenges facing LGBTBC” and provided the perspective of allies with “LGBT family members.” Finally, Jesse was well-connected throughout the community and knew what events were being held and how LGBTBC could participate. LGBTBC leaders turned to the best equipped member to maximize LGBTBC’s efforts, particularly in proposing the anti-discrimination ordinance, which built trust, created cohesion, and unified LGBTBC. Importantly, expertise was not only based on skills, but often on embodied experiences of being an LGBT individual to talk about embodied experiences that shaped the need for social change.

LGBTBC’s shared leadership certainly acknowledged contextual and situational factors but was different from these leadership theories in that each of the board members acted as leaders working in concert rather than as a leader “participating” with followers. Clearly relationships were also important to the board members, but unlike relational leadership theories, the decision-making processes and authority for the group was shared equally across board members. Finally, while the group certainly worked hard to develop each of the board members, this was a process of collective and mutual influence that differs from mainstream developmental leadership theories where the leader is developing followers.

By identifying and assimilating new members into the LGBTBC board, making decisions through a group discussion processes, and sharing the leadership to leverage each member's personal expertise and experiences, LGBTBC leaders created cohesion inside and outside of the board meeting sessions. As a whole LGBTBC relied on collective leadership to motivate the City Commission members to add sexual orientation and gender identity to the list of protected classes, while educating community members about LGBT issues.

### **Proactive Communication**

The second overarching tactic LGBTBC leaders used to enact change was proactive communication which reflects existing research on LGBT minority group leadership. As discussed in the literature review, the process of coming out often gives LGBT individuals the ability to cope with difficult situations, handle criticism in constructive ways and create useful support networks to advocate for themselves and others (Friend, 1991). Further, LGBT individual's marginalized status can enhance LGBT leaders' ability to collaborate with others (Chang & Bowring, 2015) and develop strategies for change that inspire others.

In this study, LGBTBC leaders anticipated objections and developed responses in advance. LGBTBC recognized that the City Commission members would claim that, though the discrimination of LGBT individuals existed elsewhere, it wasn't happening in Anytown. This realization forced LGBTBC leaders to approach City Commission meetings with a plan to highlight injustices that would otherwise not surface through two strategies: (1) building a narrative of discrimination in Anytown and (2) identifying community allies.

First, LGBTBC proactively worked to collect stories and *build a narrative*. Up until October 2015, LGBTBC worked with a strategy rooted in logical arguments, providing an overwhelming amount of statistics and information about the type of discrimination LGBT individuals faced in the state on a day-to-day basis, but this strategy wasn't motivating the City Commission members to vote on the non-discrimination policy. Casey talked with multiple City Commission members and shared, "What they said is that our argument is compelling with all the statistics, but it's not happening here in our community." Casey proactively sought out information to identify objections, then the LGBTBC board used this information to shift tactics.

Jamie and Taylor immediately spoke up about discrimination they personally had experienced. Taylor shared, "If some of these people knew who and what I was, there would be pressure to get rid of me [at work]." Jamie also articulated an experience of discrimination, "When they found out I was transgender, [a potential employer] immediately asked me, 'how are we gonna' handle bathrooms?' and that's not something that would ever be asked to a cisgender person." Hearing these stories, Casey suggested, "If each of us can reach out and bring forward one story of LGBT discrimination, we can start to build a narrative to prove that discrimination is in fact happening here and that this ordinance would stop it."

The leaders of LGBTBC agreed that everyone should gather several stories. This was another example of collective leadership, but instead of relying on individual expertise as mentioned above, they identified and built narratives as a proactive defense. They changed their strategy from statistics to stories to make the City Commission members understand the discrimination. Jordan explained, "It's putting faces on what it means to be a LGBT individual in [Anytown] ... This is impacting the lives of real people."

Gathering stories from community members was an important aspect of LGBTBC's proactive defense because it allowed LGBTBC leaders to tell a holistic narrative of LGBT individuals within Anytown, not just the stories from nine people who ran an LGBT organization. During the April 2016 City Commission meeting, LGBTBC leaders provided a document with all the collected stories from people in Anytown, told their own stories, and invited other community members to orally share stories. After proposing the anti-discrimination ordinance to the City Commission, the mayor opened discussion, to determine if this was an issue valued in the community. A line of people ran from the front podium to the back door and for approximately three hours LGBT individuals who had experienced discrimination and LGBT allies spoke. Stories spanned all types of discrimination from experiences with schools to housing evictions to families. A local teen arrived later in the evening, after watching the meeting unfold on the local TV station and felt it was necessary to speak out on LGBT discrimination and the pain he experienced the past year sharing "In the past year alone, I have had fifteen of my friends commit suicide because they are gay. Fifteen! ... Please protect us. Fifteen people is too many." By proactively inviting as many people as possible to share their story, LGBTBC successfully shifted the way City Commission members viewed the issue,

thus motivating them to enact change. At the end of this meeting, the five City Commission members voted unanimously to add sexual orientation and gender identity to the list of protected classes.

A second proactive strategy included identifying allies. This strategy differs from the predominant leadership theories discussed earlier because it relied on the help of others to lead, rather than placing the emphasis on the leader. The LGBTBC leaders knew that the stories of discrimination would not be enough to motivate the City Commission to enact change. During the November board meeting Alex explained that discrimination based on religion was allowed because “sexual orientation and gender identity are not backed by the state.” LGBTBC leaders recognized that they needed a way to fight religious objections to work in their favor. Casey identified a local congregational leader who might be willing to help because “she had written a couple of editorials to [the local newspaper] about how we need to be an inclusive community and what we needed to do.” The group decided to contact inclusive congregations and local clergy who could act as allies to promote the religious basis for equality and speak on behalf of LGBTBC. Identifying and partnering with allies was crucial for LGBTBC.

At the April 2016 City Commission meeting, clergy member allies in support of LGBTBC’s mission spoke up. Casey shared that they had aligned with a total of 23 clergy members, representing seven congregations, and at least one member from each congregation was represented at this meeting. Whenever the opposing side would stand up, read a verse from the bible, and articulate a religious aspect of why the ordinance shouldn’t be passed, the supporting clergy members got in line to diffuse those claims by providing another religious remark in favor of LGBT inclusivity, thus canceling out or refuting the previous religious argument. A local religious leader of the opposing side argued, “no man shall lie with a man as he lies with a woman, as this is immoral. This is in the bible, God’s words and thus should be held in high order.” A clergy member in support of the ordinance got up and argued that, “‘honor and love thy neighbor’ is also in the bible, so why should we not hold this in high order?” This went back and forth, some arguments relying on bible verses, others deeply rooted in personal beliefs. The LGBTBC allies provided important voices that were not LGBT and were not connected to LGBTBC other than their support. In the focus group, Casey articulated, “The Commissioners wanted other voices. They were sick of hearing the nine of us talk. By contacting those clergy members and getting them to speak out in support of us provided that variety.”

LGBTBC leaders worked collectively with the local congregations, adding the representatives of these congregations to their email chain so that they could all remain in immediate contact with one another. LGBTBC leaders and clergy allies worked together to draft editorials for the local newspaper. Also, the clergy members helped explain and educate LGBTBC about the religious side of the debate, while LGBTBC leaders educated the clergy members on some of the political concerns. “The letters we wrote [with clergy] really helped us,” Casey noted in the focus group. “After reading them, other congregations reached out to us or the clergy members we had already been in contact with and asked, ‘what can we do to help?’” These relationships enhanced LGBTBC’s ability to remain proactive, as the clergy members were able to predict what the opposing congregations would say and remain one step ahead.

The City Commission members voted unanimously to amend the list of protected classes to include sexual orientation and gender identity. However, they did not vote to pass the specific ordinance LGBTBC drafted and proposed because the City Commission members couldn’t agree on the enforcement of violations. Ultimately, LGBTBC interpreted this meeting and the unanimous vote to include sexual orientation and gender identity as a protected class as a major win, and the first step toward LGBT equality within Anytown. The reliance on others to create social change was essential to LGBTBC’s success and is a departure from predominant leadership theories where the leader influences followers. In line with previous research on LGBT minority leaders, LGBTBC leaders worked creatively and strategically to understand the community political systems, identify ways to influence officials, and then found allies to enhance their credibility and share leadership to ultimately instigate change.

Creating cohesion within their group, the LGBT leaders were able to speak, think, and act as a unified force within the community, engaging in a type of shared and collective leadership where they were all stronger together rather than individually. While leaders generally work to create group cohesion among members, LGBTBC was unique in the strategies they used to share leadership and empower all members of the board to lead simultaneously. This cohesion allowed them to garner defense in a proactive way, shifting the argument from logical to emotional by building a narrative of discrimination and identifying allies within the community to aid in their defense.

## Discussion and Implications

Due to their unique leadership based on their experiences of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity, the leaders of LGBTC successfully inspired the City Commission to enact change. Research supports the importance of having diversity in groups because diverse members promote positive outcomes in terms of production, creativity, and attraction of potential investors, consultants, or interest groups (Eagley, 2016). Including diverse members on the LGBTC board was motivated by a desire to move the group forward and enhance creativity; the past leaders recognized that LGBTC had become stagnant and needed to innovate to better engaged with members and the community. LGBTC minority leaders' behaviors are supported by Packer, Miners, & Ungson (2018) findings that including marginalized individuals within groups contributes to cognitive heterogeneity where "the expression of different perspectives and ideas should improve performance, particularly in groups facing complex tasks requiring innovation" (p. 59). Further, Page's (2008) research extends recognition of the importance of cognitive heterogeneity, explaining that the conscious acknowledgment of the importance of diversity is essential to the success and the development of core values. LGBTC leaders leveraged their diversity to share leadership and proactively approach challenges.

As observed, LGBTC utilized specific characteristics and personality strengths developed from their experiences as being part of the marginalized and diverse LGBT community. These characteristics were leveraged to (1) share leadership, (2) enhance emotional communication, (3) promote inclusivity, and (4) build partnerships within the community.

### Shared Leadership

First, considering the LGBTC leaders' most prevalent and effective strategies involving cohesive and proactive communication, the study highlights how relational leadership can be used by minority leaders to promote social change. Because LGBT leaders felt marginalized within their own community, it was important for the leaders to band together and share leadership to present a unified front. Leadership often indicates a power dynamic where one person is in charge and the followers take the lead. Even in relational leadership, the relationship between the leader and the follower is enhanced, but there is not an equal distribution of power. LGBTC engaged in an adaptation of relational leadership through *fully sharing* leadership to create cohesive communication.

Shared leadership is "an emergent team property that results from the distribution of leadership influence across multiple team members" (Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007, p. 1218). Shared leadership allowed each LGBTC leader to contribute individual skills while working on a common goal, which may also be effective for other minority leaders because resources are pooled to increase effectiveness. In essence the leader was not one individual, but nine individuals functioning collectively to enhance the scope of the impact in Anytown. However, shared leadership is only successful when the group is able to (1) promote teamwork by adequately dividing tasks among members, (2) put personal recognition aside to focus on the group goal and success, and (3) communicate effectively and openly with all members (O'Toole, Gabraith, & Lawler, 2002).

Passing the anti-discrimination ordinance proved to be a difficult task due to all the nuances of gender equality and acceptance of LGBT individuals, specifically regarding transgender rights. The City Commission members were hesitant to add gender identity as a protected class because of concerns about gender assigned bathrooms and co-worker and customer perceptions. These concerns created a specific focus for LGBTC leaders, who recognized they needed to rely on the knowledge, skill, expertise, and embodied LGBT experiences of all group members and their relationships to accomplish their overall goal.

### Emotions

Secondly, through the marginalization experienced within their own community, the leaders of LGBTC were successfully able to communicate an emotional necessity to enact change. It is noteworthy that the previous board of heterosexual leaders recognized they needed minority leader participation and insight to enact community change. After experiencing discrimination first hand and witnessing it from other members within the LGBT community, the newly elected minority leaders of LGBTC expressed and worked to control emotions which is characteristic of relational leadership (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). The LGBT leaders' initial approach to remove emotions and use statistics and logical appeals was not sufficient. Although organizations largely prefer logic and

neutral or positive emotions in decision making processes (Riforgiate & Komarova, 2017), LGBTC departed from traditional organizational behaviors of emphasizing rationality and logic and decided that to be heard they needed to do something differently. LGBTC leaders encouraged others' narratives of highly negative emotional experiences, motivating people to attend the City Commission meetings to share their stories. Without the emotional arguments they provided through narratives, it may not have been possible for the leaders of LGBTC to convince the City Commission that discrimination against LGBT individuals was salient in Anytown.

### **Inclusivity**

Thirdly, after experiencing a wide variety of discrimination within their community due to their sexual orientations and gender identities, the leaders of LGBTC emphasized a welcoming and supportive environment. This environment emphasized discussion-based decision-making strategies to create cohesion amongst the entire group and provided a practical implication of inclusivity. Inclusivity can benefit other organizations in which members experience discrimination and be particularly helpful for minority groups. LGBTC leadership worked to make sure everyone's voices were heard.

While established leadership theories emphasize follower participation in varying degrees, these theories do not cast every member as collaborative leader in the way LGBTC functioned. All decisions were made through open group discussions with active participation of all board members; this created a group of leaders with shared power. LGBTC further benefited by including various members throughout the LGBT community. By having embodied representation of the gay community, transgender community, and heterosexual community, all angles of discrimination could be detailed. The inclusive nature of the group allowed for various minority groups to come together fighting for change as one larger force.

### **Strategic Partnerships**

Due to their marginalized status, the leaders of LGBTC recognized they needed to bring their argument into a majority standpoint and prove that this was a community crisis and not merely an individualized dilemma. Addressing this challenge, LGBTC enacted strategic partnerships that were instrumental to create social change. Certainly, many types of leaders benefit from allies in and outside of organizations; however, the minority position of LGBT leaders made these partnerships more important for success in creating community change. Non-affiliated community members including clergy from local congregations and LGBT community members enhanced LGBTC's ability to motivate the City Commission to enact change. LGBTC leaders extended their leadership externally to provide a variety of voices and provide evidence to prove discrimination existed. This suggests that minority leaders can network with community partners to gain a better understanding of issues, provide a deeper perspective and scope of the concern, and generate a more inclusive way to achieve goals.

### **Complicating Leadership Theory**

Finally, while LGBTC leaders predominantly used relational leadership that allowed them to accomplish social change, it is important to note that they also used other leadership communication strategies. Of the 291 coded segments sorted by predominant leadership theories, communication strategies for each theory were represented (44 individual leadership; 34 contextual leadership; 175 relational leadership; 38 developmental leadership). While approximately 60% of the leader communication was coded as relational leadership, LGBTC leaders engaged in other types of leadership communication as needed. This confirms Omilion-Hodges and Wieland's (2016) work arguing for the need to complicate the way scholars theorize and teach leadership communication. Further, LGBTC leaders went beyond notions of relationships with their followers to create a shared and cohesive leadership that differs from the predominant leadership theories and requires extensive collaborative communication efforts.

This complication, according to Robles (2012) is necessary because, by examining leadership solely based on predominant theories such as task and relational methods, hinders the application of creative forms of leadership to develop in ways that are unique to social change. This study agrees with Hackman and Johnson's (2009) argument for the need to remove the dichotomy associated with leadership. The leaders of LGBTC banded together and used their unique differences that grew from the experiences they had regarding their differing sexual orientations. The leadership in this case study extended beyond task and relationship orientations. The leadership was shared,

specified collective goals, and proved effective at creating social change because LBGT minority leaders involved groups outside of their own to advocate with them. Scholars can benefit by shifting focus from “the leader” by complicating what the term “leader” refers to and how the leader(s) coordinate action with others through communication exchanges. LBGT acted as a collective group of leaders who jointly worked to inspire a community.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

LBGT was chosen for this study because of the injustice experienced within the LBGT community of Anytown and the commitment LBGT had to achieving political rights and social change. However, because this group existed on a local level in a small Midwestern town, the findings may not be representative of groups sharing this marginalized status. Further research can refine the study findings on minority leadership communication and social change and extend the research to other minority group demographics and geographic contexts. Additionally, LBGT leaders were volunteers which likely influenced their communication strategies; further research should consider other voluntary organizations where members are motivated by personal or emotional interest, rather than professional or financial gain.

### **Conclusion**

This qualitative study explored how LBGT leaders motivate others to enact social change. Analysis indicated that LBGT leaders engaged in relational leadership that included cohesive communication practices, such as (1) recruiting and assimilating leaders, (2) engaging in group discussion and decision-making, and (3) capitalizing on individual members’ strengths. Further, LBGT leaders used proactive communication to (1) collect community narratives and (2) develop community ally partnerships. What differentiates the way these minority leaders functioned from mainstream leadership theories is the extensive efforts to share leadership; this practice allowed leaders to have many voices and more influence than any one single leader. Though no national anti-discrimination law is currently in place, groups like LBGT are fighting to change this. Understanding effective leadership communication strategies among minority group members can help identify avenues for social change so that one day, all can be treated equally.

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