

HOW TO CREATE A
WINNING COMPANY CULTURE

HEROES FOR HIRE:
VETERANS IN THE WORKPLACE

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INCLUSION

WINTER 2020 +
ISSUE 5

*Creating Globally
Inclusive & Culturally
Competent
Workplaces*

EXECUTIVE COACH

JOHN
VOLTURO

Leading the Charge
on Implementing
Inclusive Practices





John Volturo

Executive Coach

John Volturo is a business strategist and executive coach. His transformational omnichannel consumer initiatives have driven over \$1.5 billion in top-line growth for brands such as Havas, Viacom, Bertelsmann, Guthy-Renker, BeachMint, Spark Networks, and Basic Research.

Volturo's team built out Tony Robbins's Personal Power and Get the Edge products, which have changed the lives of 40 million customers. He was also responsible for reigniting the Pilates craze in the United States through the introduction of Winsor Pilates.

Through Volturo's leadership at BeachMint, he connected six celebrity/influencer-driven

businesses, generating millions of members for Jessica Simpson, Justin Timberlake, Kate Bosworth, Rachel Bilson, and Brooke Burke.

Volturo is president-elect of the International Coaching Federation of Los Angeles. As an out gay man for 30 years, he is passionate about advancing LGBTQ+ acceptance at work. He has dedicated his life's work to raising awareness with allies and developing strategies with LGBTQ+ people to navigate the workplace. This work has never been more important because more than 50 percent of all LGBTQ+ people in the United States are still in the closet and are not bringing their authentic selves to work. Volturo's work in the LGBTQ+ community focuses on strategies that drive inclusion and full expression of each person.

Inclusion: What brought you to do this work?

John Volturo: I am compelled to help LGBTQ+ people navigate the workplace because I grew up without any models for success, and it doesn't have to be that way anymore. Growing up in Brooklyn, New York, in the 1980s, I was the young gay boy who was not savvy enough to realize that I should hide who I was to be accepted. Instead, I presented the full spectrum of myself to people, and I was often on the receiving end of discrimination and physical violence.

The same experience followed me to college and the workplace. I decided to be myself, not knowing I would become a target for sexual comments, overt discrimination, and worse. There were zero out LGBTQ+ leaders when I started work—not much has changed, as there are only about 20 openly



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gay directors of Fortune 500 companies. Back then, people uttered hateful things to LGBTQ+ people they’d never speak to anyone else, even at that time. I thought I would never succeed because non-LGBTQ+ people equated being gay with sex. I was uncomfortable at work and overlooked, though I was a productive contributor. When that happens, sometimes we seek to create a distraction. So I got an MBA. I became a worker with an MBA instead of just a gay employee. As a leader, I intentionally hired women, people of color, and people from different religious backgrounds. I knew personally that diversity was vital to workplace success. Fast-forward, and I’m an executive coach. Everything is coming full circle, where now my main focus is helping LGBTQ+ leaders navigate and succeed in the workplace.

IN: What are some challenges you faced in the workplace as an out gay man, and how did you navigate them?

JV: It’s challenging to be an out LGBTQ+ person at work. Many LGBTQ+ people don’t have traditional backgrounds. At one job where I was an executive, there was an impenetrable old boys network of married white men with kids. I wanted to excel, but I didn’t want to be someone else. It was rough. I got an executive coach who sadly told me to model myself in the image of my boss—basically to be someone else. To succeed, I was told, I had to change my way of dressing, how I styled my hair. Only then would I be part of the club—the club that held the key to my entire professional future.

In another role, I was the chief marketing officer at a Christian-only dating website. Imagine, an openly gay man running one of the world’s largest Christian dating sites! Before I

took that job, I mentioned to my CEO that I am a married gay man with children (visualize a straight ally having to do this). I told my CEO that a safe environment was required for me to fully show up and do the job the CEO and board wanted me to do. That’s a luxury many others don’t have, and I recognized this. When I arrived at the job, I faced a different reality, however. The words on paper didn’t mean as much when we dealt with outside stakeholders, who would say things like, “I don’t want to work with an organization that supports gay rights or marriage.” We needed those stakeholders to perform for us so we could achieve for the Christian community. I felt torn. My stress level rose because I had a responsibility to the board, but I also had a duty to myself and my family. I had to walk a tightrope to be authentic while getting the job done. That was a pivotal moment, and I realized the ground rules had to change for LGBTQ+ people at work and that my experiences and journeys could be transformative for others.

IN: Is there a piece of advice that a mentor or sponsor in the workplace gave you that has served you well?

JV: In California in 2008, Prop 8 was on the ballot. My family’s and friends’ futures were in the balance. Voters would either approve or disapprove of gay marriage, potentially nullifying those marriages already made. It felt like it was a vote to determine whether I was a legitimate member of society. A mentor told me I should be myself and fight for my rights. After the vote passed and marriage became restricted to opposite-sex people, I oddly felt this permission to stop being someone else at work and, instead, to stand up for rights and to be visible about it. Three or four years of wearing different outfits, combing my hair conservatively, and trying to figure out how to get into the good ol’ boys club were finally over. I didn’t fit that mold, and it was okay. I began to look inward and start making choices that were authentic to me to succeed.

IN: You are an executive coach. Who do you coach?



JV: My clients include LGBTQ+ individuals and their straight allies. While we may want similar outcomes in life, we may have different ways of achieving those professional and personal goals. With LGBTQ+ individuals, I work to identify strategies to grow their presence, contribute at their highest value, and show up as a whole person. To achieve that outcome, many recognize that the success formula requires openness and honesty. So, we work together on strategies to come out, first learning how safe it would be at their company—and, if that's their path, how best to bring their whole person to work. It's a process, and the employee's safety, both physical and emotional, is of paramount importance.

I also work with LGBTQ+ people who are already out and want more from their careers. They want to make sure their values are in alignment with their company, so together we develop a plan and a process to succeed. Leadership presence is a key reason people seek executive coaches. Sometimes this also means building presence, enhancing leadership skills, becoming more self-aware—important workplace traits that allow people to achieve for the company and themselves.

I also work with non-LGBTQ+ managers on building diverse, more inclusive workplaces that focus on success metrics. We all know, via research, that decisions that result in higher profitability occur when made by a diverse group of people. On top of that, we also run coaching circles for LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ people, workshops, and seminars. I do public speaking engagements as well.

IN: What are some common misconceptions that need to be dispelled to help LGBTQ+ feel fully included in the workplace?

JV: LGBTQ+ people battle bias in the most common of routines. Whether we want to buy a wedding cake or hit the gym with friends, everyday activities and work are fraught with potential challenges. We can all help dispel the most common biases about LGBTQ+ people, including their sexualization. For example, it's just as likely that non-LGBTQ+ people will be

attracted to others at work as it is for LGBTQ+ people. Issues of gender identity are challenging for non-LGBTQ+ people. Very few straight men worry about their masculinity. Gay men do. This can result in intentionally lowering one's visibility, which is not going to help people grow their companies or their salaries. Allies can help to bridge the gap in understanding each other by fostering open dialogues at work and helping to visibly increase the contributions of LGBTQ+ people at work and in the community.

IN: What are some of the challenges specific to the LGBTQ+ population who aspire to top leadership roles, such as the C-suite?

JV: Interestingly, the biggest challenge I see today for up-and-coming LGBTQ+ leaders is in aligning company culture with stated LGBTQ+-friendly policies, plus fostering an environment where LGBTQ+ leaders with significant influence and authority can be open and more visible, so LGBTQ+ people may advance in the workplace. We need more visible role models at the very top.

Despite the fact that 93 percent of all Fortune 500 companies have diversity and inclusion initiatives, for a lot of LGBTQ+ people, it's still "don't ask, don't tell," meaning they will remain quiet about their lives to land a job, and maybe, just maybe, come out over time if it feels safe and after they've developed



From top: John in the studio recording *Lessons My Father Never Taught Me* podcast, April 2019; John on *Food Exposed*, with Jackie Keller; John with International Coaching Federation CEO Magda Mook and Coach Asuka Naito

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a proven track record. The reality is often different for those on the ground who are thinking about an upward career path. Coaches are powerful allies for individuals in the LGBTQ+ community. Questions like “Can I keep a photo of my spouse or partner on the desk?” become very real deal-breakers for someone striving to be part of the C-suite. That’s too much stress to deal with when you have deadlines. When you look at corporate leaders, it’s hard to find openly LGBTQ+ leaders. Fewer than 20 of the board directors at Fortune 500 were openly gay in 2018. With more out role models, things can change.

We may have marriage equality in the US, but there is still no federal protection that prohibits LGBTQ+ discrimination, meaning a person risks getting fired in 29 states for being lesbian or gay and in 31 states for being trans. So, there’s a hodgepodge of protections, and unless the federal law changes, we will have to continue to open the hearts and minds of people until enough people demand that change happens. Sadly, for LGBTQ+ workers to be protected depends on where you live and the company for which you work.

IN: Is security a pressing concern for LGBTQ+ people in the workplace? Do you have any metrics or stories as examples?

JV: Security is absolutely a pressing concern for LGBTQ+ people in the workplace. According to the Human Rights Campaign, around 50 percent of LGBTQ+ workers are in the closet at work, and unfortunately, they have a good reason. Consider this data from Catalyst, the research company: 20 percent of LGBTQ+ Americans have experienced discrimination when applying for jobs, 22 percent have not been promoted or paid equal to their peers, 27 percent of transgender workers either were not hired, were fired, or were not promoted due to their gender identity, and over 50 percent of LGBTQ+ employees overheard harmful lesbian or gay jokes at work. Perhaps, as a result, 31 percent of LGBTQ+ workers say they’re depressed or unhappy at work. It’s no wonder LGBTQ+ people often hide personal relationships and change the way they speak and the way they look. It’s not that safe. That’s why they are looking to avoid



John at “What is Culture?” conference, Los Angeles, June 2019.

discrimination and harming work relationships.

Things may change, however. All eyes are on the Supreme Court now as three landmark civil rights cases are in the justices’ hands. In each case, a company fired a worker because the worker was part of the LGBTQ+ community. If the court rules in favor of the plaintiffs, Title VII could cover sexual orientation or gender identity and provide federal workplace protections to the LGBTQ+ community.

IN: How can allies and LGBTQ+ people work together to increase workplace acceptance and security?

JV: LGBTQ+ people are constantly observing surroundings for signals that it’s safe to be ourselves—and, yes, it’s exhausting. Allies have been and will remain critical to our safety, growth, and workplace acceptance. Thank you, allies!

I generally tell allies that the best they can do is visibly help out and listen to LGBTQ+ people, take a stand against derogatory comments, and use nongender pronouns as often as possible. This behavior is inclusive and makes a real difference.

Sharing can make a huge difference in the workplace. Case in point: A straight friend of mine leads one of the largest gay employee resource groups in his industry in a southwestern state. At his wedding, he and his bride proclaimed that they don’t take privilege for granted. They talked about the work to be done and devoted their ceremony to the inclusivity of the LGBTQ+ community in the workplace and community.

To effect change at his company, he started a conversation about inclusion, affirmed the LGBTQ+ people he knew, and created a safe place by making sure conversations did not contain noninclusive or offensive language, and then LGBTQ people became more comfortable. This gathering for LGBTQ+ people and their allies took off, and it made a difference for many, many workers when the resource group got off the ground. When we look at how partners can support us, I tell this story. That’s a faithful ally. **IN**