

When Diversity Is Worth Gold

Stanford Program teaches LGBTQ executives to become better leaders by taking on and embedding their identities in the workplace.

by [Claudia Penteadó](#)

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Chiqui Cartagena, an Univision executive in New York during class at Stanford. Photo Elena Zhukova

Lawrence Spicer, vice president of the RBC bank in Toronto, Canada, was one of the students in the first group of the [Stanford LGBTQ Executive Leadership program](#), held at Stanford University, California. The course was developed by professors Tom Wurster and Sarah Soule of Stanford Graduate School of Business to develop leadership and empower LGBTQ executives, and brought together 43 professionals from eight different countries from a variety of industries from the public and private sectors into an experience which has been described as transforming. In addition to

all the content about Stanford's own leadership and caliber, such as design thinking and decision-making techniques, the course provides intense and unique experiences, such as exercises for the expression of power as well as vulnerability, and teaches building environments labor markets.

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— Chiqui Cartagena, Vice President,
Univision Communications

In Lawrence's case, the course encouraged him to go even deeper to help transform the LGBTQ experience of businesses, communities, and countries. Dipping into the program gave him, he says, the sense of empowerment in the process of transformation within his own company. The fact of being with professionals with similar experiences generated conversations that would never happen in any other environment, and the network of contacts created there remains strong until today.

There is an indisputable fact in today's global business environment: diversity is already considered to be the key growth driver for companies. Diversity and inclusion, whether viewed from the perspective of value or business, will be increasingly determinant in the success of companies — although many of them (Brazilian or otherwise) have not agreed to date. It's a matter of time. This makes professionals like Lawrence and his colleagues just out of the Stanford program, worth gold.

Because, as he says, one must consider the workforce of the future and its expectations. For talented employees and young people in the LGBTQ universe, do not have an LGBTQ leader in the businesses to identify with can be a great missed opportunity.



Lawrence Spicer, vice president of the bank RBC. Photo Martin Shoesmith / RBC

“When I think of millennials, be they heterosexual or identified as LGBTQ, their expectations will require companies to provide an inclusive and barrier-free working environment. Having senior executives at all levels, including the senior level, who embrace diversity and inclusion will become increasingly important. Leaders of the future in organizations ‘will not be what they can not see.’ ”Lawrence noted.

Lawrence was already determined to help the next generation of LGBT employees within the bank where he works, but one of the great roles of the program was to allow him to dream a little higher: believing it could impact not only Canada but globally.

“I feel more confident to use the ‘executive currency’ I have in my hands to help influence my organization through the many relationships I've built within it over the years. I am sure that sharing the experience I had Stanford will accelerate the dialogue, and create sustainable change.”

The very fact that a university like Stanford is gambling on such a program and attracting top executives from many parts of the world is itself a great story, as well as a powerful message for companies about the importance of supporting the development of LGBTQ leaderships.

Lawrence did not want to tell me details or personal moments of the most intense experiences of the course. He said that perhaps the best stories should be kept for participants.

“These are stories that, when we are alone, busy at work, make us stop and smile. Knowing that another 43 people may be smiling, at that very moment, remembering the same episode,” he said.

It is interesting to imagine that, possibly, 85 powerful seeds like this were planted in the two classes that were already formed in the Stanford Executive Program for LGBTQ leaders. The first group was held in August 2016 and the second in August. Tom Wurster and Sarah Soule



Professors Tom Wurster and Sarah Soule of the Stanford Graduate School of Business. Photo Elena Zhukova

of Stanford Graduate School of Business have created the course by realizing that working on LGBTQ identity can in many ways be the great key to professional development and business leadership in this rapidly changing and emergency world of young executives belonging to these groups. Stanford already has a track record in training and leadership programs for “minorities” such as women or Americans of Asian origin, for example. In the LGBTQ program, “Sarah and I believe that business success is deeply connected to identifying, promoting, and accelerating talent in its

diversity. Companies that host, care for, and develop the best thinking and execution are usually those capable of finding talent anywhere — often including ‘marginalized’ and less visible executives. Basically, we have taken inspiration from that perspective to create a program that broadens those possibilities,” said Wurster.

The first course included speakers such as neuroscientist Vivienne Ming and Lord John Browne, former CEO of BP and author of “The Glass Closet,” in which he recounts the experience of 38 years of “double life” in the corporate world , trying to hide his gay identity. In the second edition, one of the striking presence was the strategist and activist Kathy Levinson, former COO of E-Trade and creator of the Lesbian Equity Foundation. She was a pioneer in fighting (and making achievements) for the rights and benefits of LGBT people in the workplace.

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LGBTQ executives made me feel empowered and inspired to truly bring my true self to work every day. Before Stanford, I felt compelled to, every day, draw on one dimension or disguise another, depending on the occasion. I realized that it's important for my co-workers to realize that all three dimensions together make me a more valuable contributor - because all three are important to our business,” he says.

Today, Chiqui recognizes that she can draw on these three dimensions to help generate results, and that part of her role as a leader is to help educate people about how a Latina lesbian can in fact be a great executive and an example.



One of the Stanford LGBTQ Executive Leadership classes. Photo Elena Zhukova

Chiqui Cartagena, senior vice president of Policy, Advocacy and Governance at Univision Communications in New York, was one of the participants in the second edition of the program, and said personally and professionally transformed. A woman, a lesbian and a Latina, she tells us that throughout her career she learned to “disguise” — not to reveal — her various personal dimensions, every day, both at work and outside.

“Being in a classroom with 40 other LGBTQ executives made me feel empowered and inspired to truly bring my true self to work every day. Before Stanford, I felt compelled to, every day, draw on one dimension or disguise another, depending on the occasion. I realized that it's important for my co-workers to realize that all three dimensions together make me a more valuable contributor - because all three are important to our business,” he says.

Another key change, she says, is that her network of colleagues has expanded a bit after the program. Today she can turn to for advice or simply exchange ideas with a group of people including not only who was with her in the classroom last August, but also the group of the first class, of which Lawrence is a part.

“I’m not alone anymore. I have people of my level whom I can call at any moment to ask for advice, and this includes teachers Tom and Sarah. I have literally 50 new friends on Facebook / LinkedIn with

whom I feel connected and in a few years they will be 500. This is the most immediate change,” he reports.

She says, like Lawrence, on a collective mission to help the corporate world understand that LGBTQ leaders can accelerate business growth and that the companies that will win in the near future will be those with leaders who understand today's new multicultural world — the multicultural consumer at the heart of their growth strategy. Looking at the demographic reality of today's increasingly black, Latino, Asian, and gay world is a matter of survival.

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If companies are prepared to receive people like Chiqui and Lawrence? Not all, of course. It depends on the industry, and how much there is advanced and plurality mentality in leadership.

Chiqui says valuing diversity in general - and not just the LGBTQ — is not yet standard in business, despite laws being adopted in several countries in favor of, for example, gay marriage and other equal civil rights. Most companies, however, continue to adopt “doing the right things” only in speech, or marking boxes. Diversity is a mere formality in many organizations.

Being an assumed Latina lesbian is not easy in the United States, but Chiqui feels privileged in the company in which she works, which she describes as one of the most diverse and heterogeneous internal cultures in the country. In other companies where she worked, she was only seen as representing three minorities. Someone who helped “fill three boxes,” and nothing more. She confesses that she feels stronger as a LGBTQ leader than as a Latina, a still undervalued minority. And Chiqui understands the subject: she is the author of the book [“Latino Boom - Catch the biggest demographic wave since the baby boom.”](#)

From the experiences and exercises at Stanford, she holds with special affection those who have shown her that to reach the top, one does not have to show only strength.

“Great leaders are actually very empathetic and often demonstrate their vulnerabilities,” she says.

This discovery made her feel that from now on she will be better not only as a leader, but as a person with her wife, friends, and family.

She says she somehow always knew she belonged to the senior wing of the executive food chain, but now, after attending the course, she's sure. Her renewed confidence in the highest degree makes her think that she can conquer the world.