

FINDING OUR HEROES

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Legally, the gay community in South Africa enjoys a lot of protection from the constitution and other legislation. Under the surface, however, there is a lot of tension, discrimination and hate. We can't rely on others to fix this for us. We have a lot of work to do, to fix it, ourselves. **#DoSomething**

Bias is a human condition. History is rife with prejudice against groups and individuals because of their race, religion, sexual orientation and other differences. But stereotypes and unequal treatment persist, and these divisions are often exploited by hate groups. The gay community experiences much discrimination, which tears the community apart.

Great strides were made by leaders in our community, by our heroes like Judge Edwin Cameron and others, to achieve the legal freedoms we enjoy. We can hold hands in public, marry, adopt and enjoy many other benefits.

The poor and marginalised communities don't have it so easy. It's harder for a black gay man or lesbian to come out. We have killings, corrective rape, hate speech, high suicide rates and being rejected from our families when coming out. Social media draws attention to this hate, but yet it persists. There are many examples. Are our fates not interlinked? Those that discriminate against them, discriminates against us all. We all need to do something to overcome this.

Where are our everyday heroes who must continue the struggle against

discrimination? Is it that those who can no longer feel the threat of discrimination and become complacent and don't do anything? Do they not have a moral duty to do something? Hands up everyone who is actively involved in a gay organisation. Did anyone?

And so, there are few gay role models that individuals can look up to.

It is a sad realisation that we are part of the problem. We are no longer a unified community. Just look at our gay events. While it is probably not intended to be so, our events are typically divided along racial, income levels, and gay/lesbian lines. Internalised discrimination maintains these divisions in the community. We talk about LGBT, LGBTIQA and with all these acronyms we try to be politically correct or inclusive. Some would say however, that this keeps each group in their individual boxes and thereby maintaining the divides between the various sections of the gay community. So in this article, we refer to the community as gay, which encompasses all of the sections as one cohesive family. Hoping that that is what we can be one day.

And so, the poor image of the gay community is amplified from within.

There is a large "silent majority" that portray mainstream gay life, but they remain silent. This "silent majority" choose not to associate themselves with the gay community in the belief that the more visible aspects of the community do not represent them. So they remain silent and many stay in the closet. When we are distracted by avoiding being associated with the gay community, we are unable to perform to our true potential.

We need more leadership in the gay community.

That is across the board – in the economy, employment, education and governance. Many of the gay leaders in these fields do not identify as being proudly gay. These leaders and role models need to be promoted and celebrated. From there, it's a short step to shift the image of the gay community to one which mainstream gay individuals can be proud of.

Everyday heroes can make a difference. They are the ones who can bring awareness to the causes that we need to stand together to fight against. Leaders are the ones that motivate the community to effect the change we need. These leaders will be the role models that we can all look up to.

Meanwhile, other marginalised groups have made headway to overcome the discrimination that they face. What can we learn from them?

Groups from other areas of discrimination, like religion, race and class, have organised themselves into groups, and developed leaders from within. They have embraced activism and stood up for their rights. They support their own and have systems in place to keep them sustainable.

Where are all the programs that focus on developing, promoting and supporting the gay leaders, role models and organisations? It takes a lot of effort, time and money to build these groups and organisations; and not many of us have an abundance of those things. Our opinion is therefore that it is easier to get involved in existing initiatives and groups and extend their value proposition to more properly represent us, than trying to set up something new.

The solution is also just below the surface.

There is a lot of talent in the gay community that can effect all the change that is needed to overcome the hate we face. Leadership is not something we are born with, it needs to be developed. We learn from our role models. The talent needs

to be groomed into leaders, promoted into role models, and celebrated. Then it will be easier for them to lift their heads and take pride in who they are. It's a daunting task. Where do we start? Leaders will stand up to and motivate friends to overcome discrimination in their immediate circles. Start small and build from there. When a few do it, many more will follow suit.

The South African gay community needs gay focused leadership development programs and support of gay professionals, role models and leaders. If everyone takes a leadership role to do something in their own spheres of influence, then we can affect the change that the whole community needs desperately.

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WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

- A leader is someone who influences a group of people towards the achievement of a goal.
- A leader should have a vision, lead by example and motivate others to follow him.
- Unfortunately most dictionaries define a leader as someone in a position of authority, commanding his deputies.

WHO CAN HELP?

1. THE SHAMBHALA ORGANISATION

The Shambhala Organisation promotes and supports proudly LGBT business leaders. It offers a leadership development program and also showcases LGBT business leaders and role models. Like TheShambhalaOrg on Facebook, get involved and #DoSomething.

2. THE FORUM

The LGBT+ Management Forum is being set up to be an inclusive, supportive network for affinity groups within large organisations that enables LGBT professionals to contribute to their fullest potential. Their purpose is to create a safe and equitable workplace for all regardless of sexual orientation.

3. NGLCC

The National Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce in the USA is in the process of helping facilitate the establishment of an affiliated chapter in South Africa. The NGLCC assists and supports LGBT owned and managed SMEs.

ACTION PLAN TO OVERCOME HATE

1. ACT

Do something. In the face of hatred, apathy will be interpreted as acceptance. Take action or the hate persists.

2. UNITE

Each person can do their bit. But unite and we can do so much more. Get everyone involved, organise and mobilise.

3. CELEBRATE

Celebrate being gay. Gay Pride was founded to overcome hate. If you don't think the "scene" represents you, get involved and change it from within.

4. SPEAK UP

Hate must be exposed and denounced. Make sure that people hear your voice and that the message is positive.

5. TEACH TOLERANCE

Bias is learned early, usually at home. Reach out. Volunteer in schools to promote tolerance and acceptance.

6. DIG DEEPER

Look inside yourself for prejudices and stereotypes. Overcome internalised discrimination. Create diversity sensitisation.